Khan, Lion of the Desert

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Summary

James T. Kirk is an archaeologist like his parents before him, seeking to explore lost sites, and protect rare items. Alexander and Carol Marcus are an opposing family dynasty of archaeologists out for only profit. An ancient and untouched temple has been uncovered after a massive monsoon storm to a remote region of India. It is rumored to have a great treasure, and so it becomes a race of who will get there first. And what will be done with that treasure, once it is found.

Notes

This fic draws influences from: Indiana Jones, The Mummy, basic werewolf mythology, pre-Judo-Christian genesis mythologies, immortals, gods and demigods ... maybe others.

Happy Halloween!
Chapter 1

The humidity of the jungle was incredibly thick. It made it difficult to breathe for many of the mammals, who either retreated into the colder mountains, or had been swept down river with the heavy monsoon. The forest canopy collected all the heat of the sun, and did not let it go. There were signs of mud slides and rockfalls, and areas still flooded that had not been even damp the month before.

In all the sand and soil that had been washed away, were more then a few drowned animals, which the local tribes prayed for before burning their bodies. But among the dead, were also a few trinkets in the sand, broken pottery that was clearly rimmed in gold, and pearls, of all the things, that were certainly not native to the area.

These trinkets inspired stories from the tribe elders, telling tales of an ancient king of the mountains. A beloved ruler, who was buried in his beloved forest, among his most beloved possessions.

James Tiberius Kirk removed his hat and wiped a band of sweat from off his forehead. He took a quick swig from his canteen and glanced at the rough map he’s made from the description of the locals about the origin of the beautiful and strange artifacts that had been turning up since the insane monsoons had swept the region.

Jungle trekking, even alone, was nothing new to Jim. His parents had been explorers and archaeologists of the finest caliber, and even the death of his father shortly after his birth had not changed the lifestyle of his mother. She’d partnered with his father’s best friend, Christopher Pike, and raised both her sons globetrotting and discovering and investigating some of the most important finds of the day. Their education was unusual, but thorough; however, Jim showed the truest aptitude and interest in the family business. Upon reaching eighteen, Sam, Jim’s brother, left them to work on the Kirk family farm with their grandparents. But Jim stayed on, wanting only to follow in his parent’s footsteps.

His mother and Chris Pike had married a few years before and were semi-retired, preferring to work on some of the easier digs and leaving the arduous stuff to Jim. And he’d also picked up an adversary, one Alexander Marcus, who’d with his daughter, had become one of the most proficient, but underhanded, archaeologists. They preferred profit to science and were reviled by the legitimate archaeologists, especially since they forced others to rush their finds or risk having everything stolen right out from under them.

And Jim was no exception. He knew that this was a rush between himself and Marcus, one that he was determined to win. With a little grunt, he put away map and canteen and hurried toward his goal, as fast as possible through the wet jungle.

The terrain was not an easy one. Large rocks were pressed together, each trying to force the other out of its way. And in the space between were giant root systems, exposed to the air, and just as hard and immovable as the rocks. These roots formed nearly house-size obstacles, in which birds or small animals nested just out of sight, protected.

But in the floods of the monsoon, one of these great root systems, and the giant tree it had been attached to, had been torn from the earth and pushed over. The fallen tree, with roots broken or upended, was easily the size of a city building. However, now that it had fallen, a very obvious wall was exposed. A building, that had previously been entrapped by the massive tree and surrounding root system, closed in by rock slides of centuries past, now visible for the first time.
Jim stood atop the fallen monarch and surveyed the weathered rocks, which were obviously the remains of a great building. “Who built you?” he murmured and then stiffened, hearing the sound of an obvious expedition a ways behind him, the crack of trees being felled to clear the way. He scowled at the sound, knowing he did not have as much time as he wanted.

So, he plunged forward over the trunk, leaped on the stone foundation with an easy bound, and searched for an opening into the temple. Finally, he noted what appeared to be a space behind a few fallen trees. Squeezing through the small breaks between wood, he let out a small whistle of delight at the long, wide corridor that stretched ahead of him. He snagged a torch out of his bag and lit the end, holding it aloft as he walked into the depths of the temple. With competition so close behind, his goal was the center and the amazing prize that was supposed to exist there.

On the stone walls were etchings of great hoards of animals, all running forward, leading Jim deeper into the lost temple. A few thousand years ago, these etchings had likely been painted, but the color made of organic materials had long since been worn away. It wasn't until near the end of the passageway, that among the carvings of horses and eagles, lions and elephants, there were people too. Arms outstretched as they ran. A welcoming, wanting gesture. They were not running away from something, but towards the center, towards something they all desired.

At the end of the hall, was a solid stone door, cracked into thirds, from one of the former root systems that had grown over time, breaking the stone in its grasp. At the base of this broken door was a steady stream of water and a few treasures that had been washed out of the tomb.

Jim studied the decorations briefly, wishing that he had more time to do a proper survey. He swore aloud at Marcus, who would not give the proper respect to the beautiful art, but would be completely focused on any treasures, destroying the provenance of the place. However, he hurried toward the middle, believing the figures were leading him there.

He paused at the door and ran a hand down the beautiful stone, marveling at the strength of the plant that could split such a solid foundation. He picked up the trinkets at the base of the door and tossed them into the bag, before pressing his way into the middle chamber. And there, he stopped again to marvel at the treasures strewn around the room- a complete horse skeleton dipped in gold and encrusted in jewels, a lion statue with perfect form and features, some scrolls bundled in a silk satchel (which he snagged and slung over one shoulder), the horns of a ram, curved many times and also encrusted with jewels and near the true middle, bodies, carefully laid out in a row, each one covered with a beautifully hand-woven shawl.

After snagging the pair of horns, he approached the center of the room, wondering at whom might have been honored with such a spread. A few feet away from his final destination, he froze and stared with huge eyes at the figure in the center, wrapped in tight with roots ... a living figure. “What the fuck?”

A man was quietly lying on top of a gold and silver pedestal. His hair was long and black, cascading off the edge of the table. And he would have been tall, if he were able to stand. But the roots and vines had long since pinned down his arms, encasing him in a living coffin. At the sound of the voice, a human voice, something the man had not heard in centuries, he turned his head to the side, just barely managing to look at the figure.

Jim let out a yelp that he would deny for the rest of his life and managed to leap backward a good ten feet in shock. “What- who- how?” He shook his head a few times in shock, staring at the person on top of the slab with eyes as wide as saucers. And then his common sense kicked in- there was a living man trapped before him, a skeletal figure who looked a step away from death. “Fuck,” he said again and dragged his machete out from the sheath strapped to his back, before saying, “Just stay
still, and I’ll get you free from those roots and vines.” He swung easily and began to chop through the various tangles.

Staring at the fire from the torch, the first source of light he had seen in thousands of years, the man blinked once, in his own state of shock. There was someone here. A man. With fair skin and hair that looked like the woven gold shroud over his otherwise naked body. And then, relief. The weight of the roots and vines pinning him down began to ease as they were hacked away. His hand was free. It was a marvel. And with that freedom, his first action was to reach out and touch the skin of his rescuer to see if he was indeed real.

Jim nearly yelped again at the lightest touch of hand to his arm, but managed to control the urge, along with the next swing. “Be careful,” he said. “I might have cut you. Just be still until I can get this all off of you.” He offered a smile at the other man, trying to be reassuring. “Just another few to go. All right?” He frowned at some of the last, which were tightly wound around vulnerable limbs. “Please. Very still.” The sword sang again and severed a vine wrapped twice around his left leg.

Not understanding the words that were being spoken to him, the man attempted to communicate. And began to speak in a calm, warm tone. “What is your name?” he asked, but the language he spoke was an old one, an extinct language that had eventually gone on to influence Indo-Iranian languages, but it was so far removed from Punjabi or Hindi, Urdu or Nepali that it would be impossible to communicate in a modern equivalent.

Jim’s eyes widened at the words, which was nothing close to anything he was familiar with, and he spoke all of the local dialects, as well as the national language. “I’m sorry, I don’t understand,” he said in the most commonly spoken language. “Do you understand me?” he asked in a different one, hoping for some sign of recognition. And he continued to try additional ones, hoping for some sort of breakthrough, all the while, freeing the other man from his bonds. “Damn,” he said in English, at last, putting away the machete as the last root came free, “what language were you speaking?”

Some of the sounds and cadences were familiar, but the man simply shook his head, expressing that he did not understand. So he, too, tried again, this time in an ancient Tibeto-Burman, that would one day influence Himalayan, Burmese, and Tibetan. “What is your name?” How did this man come to find him? How could he possibly be real? Why were his clothes so strange? What language was he speaking?

Jim stepped forward to help clear the debris off of the man’s body, and as he did, he touched the gold fabric that covered his body. “Sorry, but I have no idea what you’re saying.” He stared at the cloth and lifted it. “Wish I did. I have a million questions for you. How did you get here? Who are you? How long have you been here?” He studied the material, noting how ancient it was and how time had worn it away. “And what language are you speaking?” He gazed into the face of the other man and swore softly at himself. “Hey, sorry, you must be parched.” Removing his canteen from where it was hooked to his bag, he unscrewed the top and offered it to the other man. “Here you go.”

For the first time in centuries, the man was able to sit up. Bending his legs so that they hung over the edge of the golden platform he had been laid out on, he touched the cloth that had covered his bare body for so long. It was lovely, just to work it between his fingers, simply because he could. However, as the stranger offered him some sort of container, all he could do was stare. What was it? What was he meant to do with it? But in hopes this might be a way to communicate, he accepted the gift and held it with long fingers.

“Uh.” Jim stared at the other man, realizing he didn’t know what to do with the canteen. With another little curse, he extracted another canteen from his pack and opened it, tilting it a little to pour a bit of water on the floor. “Water. To drink.” He mimed drinking. “Drink. Right?” Frowning, he
brought the canteen to his mouth and poured some water in from the canteen in a very obvious fashion, swallowing and making an exaggerated happy noise after. “Drink. Water.” He gestured to the other man.

Leaning forward, the man looked to the floor where the water had fallen. What was that. Then watched as the stranger drank from the container. It looked similar. Was it the same? He was meant to drink? Though it had been centuries, he had very clear memories of his attendants bringing him drinks. And they did not waste them onto the floor. And this did not look like any of his attendants. Or even their descendants.

Raising the canteen up, he sniffed the opening. It did not smell like wine. Nor did it smell like milk. Or mead. Pressing it to his lips, he carefully tipped it back and took a sip of the liquid. It was water. But different from any water he remembered drinking. His tongue worked it over his lips, then drank again with a soft sigh of relief.

“Oh hooray, one thing successfully achieved,” Jim breathed and then pulled out a chocolate bar, which he had specially made for his trips. They were excellent sources of energy, not to mention satisfied his sweet tooth. “And food,” he said, carefully unwrapping the bar from its cloth. He took a piece and tossed it in his mouth, chewing again in an exaggerated fashion, before offering a piece to the man. “Please. Try it. Slowly. How long has it been since you’ve eaten and drunk anything?” He blinked a few times at the other man and repeated his question slowly, a strange thought dawning in his mind. “How ... long ...”

Still not understanding a single one of the words spoken to him, the man was very careful to watch each gesture and listen to the tone of voice. He gave a small nod, understanding that he was being given food. It was very dark brown like burned bread, but the texture was smooth, it looked more like a floor tile then something to eat. So again, he slowly lifted the offering to his lips and tried it. His eyes instantly lit up. He had never tasted anything like it! It was sweet and creamy like honey, but so much different than honey. "Amazing!” he declared instantly.

At the sound of the word, whatever it meant, Jim’s eyes gleamed with delight, and he laughed a little. “Chocolate. It’s like a universal language, right?” He offered the man another piece. “And you’ve never had it in your life, have you?” He looked over the stranger, taking in his form, which was well designed, emaciated though he was. But as his eyes traveled up a broad chest, he paused at the sight of an amulet perched right center of the man’s collarbone. A distinctive symbol, unlike anything Jim had ever seen before ... except carved all over the walls of this splendid building.

His breath stuttered and then wheezed a few times in disbelief. “You’re at the center of this building,” he murmured. And suddenly, without warning, he raced in three circles around the pillar and platform where the man had been lying, looking over all of the decorations and desperately seeking something, anything else that might have been dead center. When he came to a full stop in front of the man again, his breath came like a billows, in and out so fast he nearly hyperventilated. “Oh my God, it’s you. You’re the center of the temple. You. And you’re alive. YOU’RE ALIVE!” He heard himself get nearly hysterical, giggling at the end like a proper mad man.

The stranger who had been patiently trying to communicate with him just moments ago, had suddenly begun to run wild. It was alarming. His darting around the room and excited language was perceived as something threatening, which was in contrast from the kindness he had just experienced. So he stood. Head high and eyes firm. As disturbing as his bony body looked, there was still enough muscle on him for a fight. "Stop this. Why are you yelling? What do you want?"

“Whoops, yeah, scaring the ancient guy,” Jim said and tried to calm down, taking deep, slow
breaths. After a moment or two, he waved a hand at the other man and said, “I’m fine. Just—well, just a bit crazed here. You’re the find of the century. The find of the millennium. The find ever!” He bit his lower lip. “Sorry, right, no shouting.” And suddenly, his brain fired a warning shot. “Oh, shit, Marcus ... the find of a lifetime.” He looked at the other man. “I can’t let them find you. Lord knows what they’ll do to you. Lock you up. Dissect you. Show you off like some sort of circus freak. I can’t let that happen.” He threw open his arms. “But I can’t understand you, and you can’t understand me.” His right hand clapped to his forehead.

“Alright, think Jim Kirk. Your escape route is still there. You’ve got enough water ... and enough food if you leave most of it for him. But can he travel?” Jim looked over the thin body and into the blazing blue eyes. “Yeah. Okay. He survived in here for a thousand years, he’ll take a few days of running through the jungle. But how do I get him to go with me? And what is he going to wear? He’ll get torn up ... and my clothes are too short and too big. Well, first things first.” He pulled another piece of chocolate off his bar and held it out to the other man while with his other hand, he clapped his chest. “Jim,” he said firmly. He repeated the chest clap. “Jim.” Accepting the piece of chocolate as a peace offering, he held it up as if to make a toast. "Jim." So that was what this was? Jim. It tasted very good. And so, he ate the sweet. As for the chest slapping, he only understood it as a gesture of greeting or respect to his status, or some sort of heartfelt apology for his previous behavior.

"Hmm." Jim wasn’t sure if the other man understood or not. But unfortunately, he didn’t have the option of waiting around to find out. He looked around them and considered his pack and finally pulled out his light blanket. “Well, this is not what I intended this for, but beggars can’t be choosers. He approached the other man slowly, holding up the blanket and reached out to remove the gold cloth and set it aside. “I hope you’ll just let me do this, put this around your body and fashion a bit of a toga for you. Trust me, I’m good at this. I’ve had to manufacture clothing before. You won’t believe what I’ve put together to escape a few bedrooms I shouldn’t have been in.”

Reaching out to touch the edge of the blanket, and deciding that the fabric was of unique quality, the man held out his arms to the side expectantly. This he understood. Someone dressing him. "Thank you, that is good." He said, allowing the other man to attend to him in this way.

“Right, okay. Thank you for making that easy.” Jim stared at the man’s feet a moment and then looked around the room. “Shoes? Shoes ... What can we use for shoes?” He noted a pair of flat sandals among the accouterments piled in a corner and said, “I hope you don’t get mad at me for this,” before hustling over to fetch them. He held them out to the man hopefully, before carefully kneeling to encourage him to lift his feet and let Jim put them on. The other man had responded well to having Jim dress him, so he hoped it would be the same this time.

Though taking the sandals from where they had been placed did make him frown slightly, there was no disrespect in it overall, therefore nothing truly to be upset with. So he accepted the having the items placed on his feet, watching the man with a curious thought. They were going somewhere? Having been trapped for so long, the idea of leaving felt like a dream.

“Excellent. We’re getting out of here right now, handsome,” Jim said. “We’ll worry about everything else later.” He held out his hand to the other man, hoping he would understand and take it. He also did a last scan of the room, wishing he could document and preserve so many of the items, but knowing they were out of time.

Alright. So they were going. Recognizing the gesture, he held up the flat of his hand, asking the golden-haired stranger to wait. Turning around, he kissed the tips of his own fingers, then presented them to the room. “Thank you my friends. It has been a great honor to have you with me for all these
years. The gods have you now. Until we meet again. You have my love."

Jim noted the behavior and filed it away to ask about in the future. He’d also ask for more details about the people, who had obviously not been immortal (immortal- was that what he was?), left in symmetry around the pedestal. He really hoped he had the opportunity. With a little gesture, he said, “Come on. We have to go. I know you can’t understand me, but I hope you can hear in my voice that I’m serious … and worried.”

Having said his good-bye, he gave one final blessing, once more kissing his fingers and presenting it to the room. That done, he accepted that it was time to leave and took hold of the forearm of the stranger. It was important that they leave. Perhaps, it was no longer safe to be there. Perhaps, he was being moved to another temple. Though after being in this one for so long, he was not certain he wanted to be in another temple. Perhaps, at the very least, this man will take him to someone who spoke his language.

“Okay, forearm holding, right,” Jim said and lightly took hold of the other man’s arm as well. “Here we go.” He urged the man on, starting out at a quick trot and hoping the other man could keep up. Their pace would only get faster once they hit the main hall, if the man is able to show that he is capable of maintaining a good speed. Jim wanted them to be long gone before the Marcuses arrive with their expedition. “I wish I had a name for you,” he said, as they begin the trek down the hall. “I might have to make something up.”

As they passed the stone carvings on the wall, he called out and pointed to them, "Oh, I forgot these were here! How lovely!" He said with a smile, but was still proving willing to follow the stranger. "They did a very good job."

“Oh, I really want to know what you’re saying,” Jim said, noting the gesture toward the walls. “Those are very beautiful works, and I want to know all about them. Later. I promise. Later. For now, we’re going to run.” And he broke into an easy jog, tugging the other man along. “Seriously, I just want to stay here and look at everything and learn all about you and this place, but we don’t have time. It’s so not fair. But that’s alright. We’ll talk all about it … when I figure out what you’re saying.” He saw the light ahead of them getting brighter and said, “I hope the light isn’t blinding for you …”

As they neared the entrance, the light from outside began to be difficult to bear, but was not impossible. He frowned his entire face several times, struggling with the light and the sounds of the jungle he had not heard in such a long time. "Everything has changed. Look at this. Nothing looks the same." He said, looking around at the unfamiliar rock clusters and the thick jungle growth.

Jim removed the hat from his head and plopped it on the other man’s hoping it might help a bit with the light. “Sorry, I should have thought of that before.” He glanced back at the temple and then tilted his head to listen for sounds of the approaching expedition. In the distance, not a few seconds later, there was the sound of a tree crashing to the ground, and Jim smiled. They still had the edge by at least half a day. “So, here we go.”

Well that was interesting. Reaching up to touch the hat on his head, he laughed. What a strange thing. Not at all like a crown or a headdress. But it did protect his eyes. "What a funny thing." He said with a smile.

Jim couldn’t help it, he smiled back at the other man, entranced by the simple look of happiness. “It’s not fair that you’re handsome, too. Right. Focus, Jim.” He squeezed the other man’s forearm and turned toward the forest, heading for his escape route. “So, I think I’m going to call you John. That’s nice and innocuous, right? Lots of Johns in the world.” He drew out his machete and used it to help cut their way along, following his innate sense of direction toward his escape route.
"Jim?" More chocolate, that was good. Holding out his hand expectantly, he repeated. "Jim?" He could definitely enjoy another piece. It was such a treat, the first sensation to have on his tongue after so many years.

Jim paused and turned toward the other man with a frown. "Yes? That’s right. I’m Jim." He stared at the outstretched hand and considered for a moment, before groaning. "Aw, Hell …" Grumbling to himself, he pulled out the bar of chocolate he’d been feeding to the man. He held it up and pointed, "Chocolate. Choc-o-late." He pointed to himself. "Jim. Jim." He repeated the action—"Chocolate," to the bar, and "Jim," to himself.

Oh. There had been a misunderstanding. The first, of likely many to come. He pointed with two fingers to the man. "Jim? Jim." Alright. The man was Jim. And the sweet thing he enjoyed to eat. "Ocolate." He nodded and pointed to the candy bar. Then held out his hand for another piece.

"Close enough," Jim said and broke off a larger piece to hand to the man. "Don’t blame you for liking this, but I hope you don’t keep eating this fast." He pointed to himself again and said, "Jim," and then pointed to the other man. He repeated this action, too. "Jim." He pointed at his new acquaintance and tried to make his silence expressive, hoping it posed the question of the other man’s name.

Listening, and understanding better this time, he nodded. Yes, introductions. That was appropriate. He pointed at the other man to confirm, "Jim." Then gestured with his hand, starting near the top of his head, slowly dropping it down as if to frame his face and torso. "I am the king. The desert Lion. Khan Noonien Singh." He said, then repeated, without the first title. "Khan. Noonien. Singh." He nodded.

"Khan Noonien Singh," Jim said and nodded. "Well, that’s a mouthful. I guess I should have said James Tiberius Kirk, but the idea of hearing you call me that over and over is rather nauseating." He put the chocolate back into his pack and pulled out a piece of jerky to munch down quickly himself. "Onward!" He caught Khan’s forearm and began to move them along again.

Now that proper introductions had been settled, Khan continued to follow after Jim. His guide. And rescuer. "I do not remember any of this." Khan continued to talk, needing to speak even though Jim did not understand him. "So much has changed. But it is beautiful."

Jim hustled them along, glad that the other man seemed to be in good health and able to keep up. He also spoke in response to the words from the other man, even though they didn’t understand each other. But the noise was somehow soothing, especially as they made the difficult trek through the wilderness. He paused at the edge of a large river and glanced at Khan, saying, "I want to cross this and get a couple more miles in before daylight fades. You think you can manage?"

As they approached the river, Khan stopped to observe. He mapped out in his mind where it was coming from, and where it was going. "This is Old Man. I know this river. It has a harsh bend in it. Old Man, you see?" Khan bent himself over, stooping as if he were an old man with arthritis in his spine, unable to hold himself upright. He indicated to his back, then both hands to the river. "Old Man. Understand?" He gave a little smile, then stood upright. "No. You do not understand."

Jim studied Khan’s moves intensely, using his quicksilver mind and knowledge of multiple languages to try and understand something out of what the other man was saying. He picked up the same words repeated several times and a gesture to the river. Was this the words for river? He pointed to the great water and said, "Old Man?" in Khan’s language, doing his best to mimic the sounds perfectly.

Khan smiled, instantly. "Yes! Old Man!" He said, gesturing to the river with both hands, then snaked
his hand in a movement to resemble the movement of the water. "What do you call it?" He looked at Jim. Then said, "Jim." Pointed at the man, then pointed at his own lips, and then finally at the river. 
"What do you call it?" He tried asking again.

Jim looked at the river and then at Khan, thinking that this was confusing. After all, the name of the river was not English, which is what Jim was speaking mostly. "Sekayam," he said, giving the native name. "Sekayam." He smiled and shrugged once. "Not my native language."

"Sekayam." Khan nodded with approval. And so after a moment of taking in the sight, he knelt down and cupped his hands. "Thank you, Sekayam for your gift." He said, then took water into the palms of his hands to drink.

"Good idea," Jim said and pulled out his canteens to refill. He glanced at Khan, thinking of what he’d just said and repeated it carefully, "Thank you, Sekayam, for your gift." not a hundred percent sure what he was saying, but having a feeling it was something ritualized. He wanted to see how Khan would react to his repeating the words.

Khan was quite shocked and surprised by this. Mere moments ago, Jim could not speak his language, and now he was repeating back the things Khan was saying. It was very promising. "Yes." Khan said with a significant nod. "The gods in the mountains collect the rain-" he began, pointing to the mountains on the far horizon, then the sky overhead. "And they allow the water to slip through their fingers into rivers, so that we might drink. It is a gift, and we thank them." Khan smiled, then laughed, knowing that there was a difference from repeating back words, to understanding what he was saying. "It is good, though." He added, taking another few handfuls of water into his hands.

Jim laughed with him and said, “Sorry, I don’t know what you’re talking about, Khan Noonien Singh. But we need to keep going. I wish I could tell you what trouble’s behind us.” He sighed and put away his canteens, before pulling out some dried fruit and offering a few to Khan. “Eat these and then we need to cross the Old Man and keep going.”

Smiles went a long way in terms of communication. It meant, even though they did not understand each other, it was alright. They would figure it out. "Yes. Old Man. Sekayam." Khan enjoyed one last drink of water, then accepted the dried fruit. He smelled it and pinched it with his fingers, trying to decide upon its texture and origin. But finally, he put the pieces in his mouth. Oh, that was quite good too. Everything in Jim's bag was tasty.

Jim munched a few fruits of his own and climbed to his feet again, slinging his bag back over his shoulders and re-securing the silk satchel with the scrolls in the most safe position. “Alright, here we go.” He took Khan’s forearm again and hurried downstream toward a huge, fallen tree that spanned the water. Fearlessly, he scrambled to the top and made his way across the log to the other side, gripping Khan’s arm tightly. “I promise, a few more hours and we’ll bed down for the night.”

Before the two crossed the fallen tree, Khan pulled his sandals off and carried them. He had better grip on the dead tree with his bare feet then the ancient footwear. In fact, he was much faster overall without them, much more sure-footed. "Where did all the people go? All the villages?" Khan asked, though of course did not expect an answer.

At the end of the log, Jim paused a moment and pulled a compass out of a pocket of his shirt. He studied it for a moment, nodded, and headed into the jungle again, still holding Khan’s arm. “A few more hours,” he murmured, glancing up to check the sun. He deposited the compass back into his jacket carefully, since it was an important part of his gear. “Sorry for rushing you, Khan Noonien Singh.” He glanced back and frowned when he saw Khan’s bare feet. “Hey, your shoes.” He gestured to the sandals and then to Khan’s feet.
“It is good. I will hold them.” He said, truly not minding in the least, and quite comfortable this way in fact. “What was that? A toy?” Khan then asked, poking at Jim's side where he had put away the compass. “What does it do?”

Jim made a slight yelping noise at the poke to the side and looked askance at Khan, before realizing that he was interested in the compass. He carefully extracted it and opened the lid, winding the strap around his hand to prevent it from falling off his palm. “Compass,” he said clearly. “Compass.” He tapped the dial and showed how the arrow moved. “This shows you what direction you’re going in.” He took another measurement and began to move again.

What a strange thing! Khan was transfixed, the arrow kept pointing in one direction, no matter how the device was turned. And Jim clearly found it useful, though he did not know why. He would have to observe for longer. "Compass.” He repeated back.

Jim smiled, shaking his head a little in amusement. “It’s going to take weeks for us to understand each other, isn’t it?” He carefully put the instrument away again and restarted their journey. “If you like the compass, there’s a million other things you’re really going to like.” He hustled them along for another few hours, until the sun disappeared behind the distant mountains, leaving the dusk in a light rose cast, with just enough light left to put up their camp.

He set his pack down and used his expertise to build them a small shelter from the local fauna, moving quickly and with obvious skill. This was something he’d done a million times before in a thousand different locations. His mother and brother taught him how to use the surroundings for survival as one of his first life lessons. “Just rest, Khan Noonien Singh, and I’ll have this ready in no time.”

Khan followed along the entire day, talking to Jim about the trees and animals, enjoying the fact that he had company. Someone to talk to. Though he did wonder where Jim's people were. Was he alone? Were there no people left in the world? So he sat down under the shelter to watch Jim, then considered. "Khan Noonien Singh.” He repeated back, but this time held both hands out to show a large gap between them. Then closing the gap to something much smaller, said. "Khan.” In this way, he was explaining that Jim did not need to call him by his full name each time.

“Khan,” Jim repeated and pointed at himself. “James Tiberius Kirk.” He repeated the gesture that Khan made with his hands and said, “Jim.”

He finished the shelter and glanced at Khan, who was wearing the blanket he’d use to make bedding normally. “Okay, something else. More leaves? No ... moss.” He scrambled up a nearby tree like a monkey and gathered a bunch, tossing it to the ground below. At one point, he hung off a limb by one arm and leg stretching to snag some more. “I hope you appreciate this, Khan.”

Yes, his name was Khan. What did Jim want? It was difficult to tell. Perhaps he was simply speaking to him. Which was fair, since Khan had done the same to Jim, all day. It looked as though Jim had everything in order. Or at least a plan. He looked like he knew what he was doing. "Jim.” He said to get his attention. "Do we drink?” He asked, placing his hands together in the form of a bowl and tipped back the imaginary drink to his mouth.

“Oh, yeah, it’ll be mealtime in a moment,” Jim said, even as he jumped the last few feet to the ground. He dug into his pack and pulled out a chocolate bar, a canteen, some dried fruit, nuts and jerky, as well as a small jar of preserves. “My grandfather makes these on his farm. They go really well on his cornbread, which I don’t have any of. But I do have some old fashioned hardtack. It’s not that old, at least.” He hauled the hard biscuits out of his pack, too, and laid everything in front of Khan. “Eat and drink.” He mimed both for Khan, before returning to setting up their bedding.
Khan reached for the canteen to drink first. It was still such a relief to have water on his lips. The hard bread looked familiar to his eyes, so Khan reached for that and bit a piece off, holding it against his tongue to slowly enjoy. "Do you know how to make a fire? Do people still make fires?"

Jim shrugged with his arms out and shook his head in the universal signal for not understanding. He also opened the jar of peach preserves, pulled out a small knife and spread some on one of the hard pieces of bread, before offering it to Khan. “I think you’ll like this,” he said. “Now, I would love some coffee to go with this, but I’m going to wait a bit more until full dark, so our smoke doesn’t attract any unwanted attention.”

Khan watched what Jim did with the jam, then did the same to the rest of his biscuit. "Thank you." He said naturally, as if those words would be understood. He gave it a try and smiled. "This is good." He looked at Jim and chuckled. "Everything you have in the bag is good."

Jim considered the first words and the context in which they had been said in and thought he might have been thanked for his offering. He decided to use those words the next time Khan did anything meriting a thanks. “You’re welcome,” he said with a grin. He began to build a stone ring for a fire, selecting some more dry sticks and leaves to put into the ring to light. With a glance at the night sky, he decided to wait a little longer and fetched some water to boil once he could light a fire.

A fire circle. Khan knew what this was. It was familiar. But Jim wasn’t lighting it yet. Which he thought was strange. Generally it is best to light a fire, while there is still enough light to see by. Khan glanced up to the sky, trying to understand what signs or key factors Jim was looking for.

Jim took out a box of matches and waited another few moments for the sky to be completely dark. He flicked the match with his thumb and grinned when it lit with a little hiss and flare. “Now, we can light the fire.” He carefully set the leaves on fire and watched as they set aflame and started the sticks going, too. “And I can have coffee.”

Oh! That was wonderful. Khan smiled at the firelight. No wonder Jim was not worried about starting a fire earlier, it did not take much time at all. Just a flick of a single stick. "Jim. This is very useful."

Khan said, pointing to the box of matches. As the fire took light, Khan moved his feet closer to the small fire, wanting to keep them dry and warm.

Jim chuckled at the expression and pulled another one of the matches out of the box. He had enough to spend a few showing Khan how to use them. “Khan, this is a match. It works like this.” He thumbed over the top and it sparks into a small flame. “Tada!” He tossed that match into the fire and then offered Khan one to try.

Marvelous! Khan accepted the gift and examined it for a minute. It felt like a small twig between his fingers, except for the tip of it. Something was different about it. Perhaps Jim had managed to get a small flint stone on the tip of the stick. He tried lighting it the way Jim had, but could not get it to work. Then gestured to Jim, handing back the match. "Show me again, please? Jim?" He asked, feeling that if he said his name, that would indicate that he wanted something.

Jim gently reached out and folded Khan’s thumb over the tip of the match, before guiding him to flick right over it. With a little hiss, the flame sprang up at the top. “Well done, Khan!” Jim enthused and pulled his hand back from Khan’s. “Toss it in the fire.” He began to boil the water for his coffee, using one of his canteens. “Always carry an extra just for my coffee.”

What a wonderful item! It certainly would make traveling much safer, to have fire at your fingertips, in such a small package. Khan enjoyed the sight of the flame on the match for a moment, then tossed it into the fire. He pondered the idea, imagining how such a small thing would have changed the world. But soon his mind drifted to watching Jim boil water in his container. “What is this? What are
“Coffee,” Jim said, knowing exactly what the other man was asking about. “It’ll be ready soon. For now, you need to eat.” He pointed at the food and made eating motions. “Come on, you’re rail thin. Time to put some meat on that frame. Although, I guess you didn’t eat for a very long time, so what’s a few more minutes, right?” He selected a piece of fruit and offered it to the other man.

"Coffee," Khan repeated back. Well, whatever that was, he was interested in trying it too. But for now, he accepted Jim's suggestion to eat. He paced himself, not rushing food into his body as he snacked on the dried fruit and another biscuit. Quietly he observed the fire, then the slowly darkening night sky. "I never thought I would see the stars again."

Jim looked up, too, following Khan’s gaze, and smiled at the small bundles of light twinkling above. “Yeah, they’re pretty amazing, too. I’ve always wondered about them ... but since there’s no getting up there, I’ve learned to enjoy what’s down here.” He poured a strong cup for each of them and said, “Alright, this takes some getting used to, but give it a try. We can add a spoonful of brown sugar if you need a bit of sweet, like I do.” He added a spoonful to his own, knowing he wanted it.

Khan accepted the drink and gave it a sniff. His brain tripped over itself in excitement, causing him to falter a moment before grinning. "This is coffee! How delightful! What a rare treat!" Khan said and gave it a sip. Though it was not as smooth as the blend he was familiar with, it was unmistakable. "Coffee!" he said, then repeated in Jim's language. "Coffee!"

“That went over well. Yes, coffee. Coffee.” Jim used both the English and whatever-language-Khan-spoke versions of the word. “We’re going to be able to have a normal conversation soon. We can say coffee, old man, thank you.” He laughed softly at the incomplete language so far and sipped his own coffee. “Perfect.”

Khan laughed, delighted. He understood that Jim was repeating back the words he had learned from Khan as a way to say, look what we have learned together! "Jim. Coffee. Thank you." Feeling very satisfied by this, Khan continued to sip the familiar drink, still while slowly eating the food Jim had provided. He did not know where they were going or what they were doing, but he felt comfortable with Jim.

Jim smiled, too, and blew out a long breath. “I really am one lucky bastard, just like mom always tells me. If you weren’t willing to just go with me on blind faith, Marcus would have grabbed you by now. So, I guess you’re lucky, too.” He took a piece of the hardtack and spread some of the jam on it, before munching it down. “Mmm, I love this jam. This bread would be inedible without it.”

Khan however did not seem to mind the hard, bland bread. It was familiar to him. And the coffee too. He was grateful. Though did not know how to convey this to his rescuer. But he listened to him speak, absorbing the sound and tone of his voice. After a few minutes he realized with a soft sound of exasperation, “For the first time, in a long time, I can sleep on my side.”

Jim wondered at the little huff, even as it made him smile. “I wish I knew what you were saying. You’ve got the best voice I’ve ever heard. Kind of like warm chocolate.” He pulled himself out of his jacket and set it aside and toed off his boots and socks, as well, stretching his toes. “Alright, we need to finish eating and get some rest. We have to get up at the crack of dawn and keep going. I’ve got horses waiting a couple of days from here, with enough food even for two of us. How I’m going to explain you is a little beyond me.” He gestured to the bed and then to the both of them.

Though he still did not understand Jim, he listened carefully, waiting for at least one word to make sense to him. Still, he could tell that Jim was trying to tell him something. And then invited him to bed. He paused a moment, careful to determine if the invitation was to sleep, or for something else.
Jim did not look like one of the priests or priestess of his time. So it was unlikely that Jim was asking for a sexual union, as a way to connect the bridge between the gods and mankind. "We will sleep now?" Khan moved into the shelter and the bed Jim had made for them, then with his head to the east, as he had been in the tomb, Khan laid down on his side.

Jim grinned and nodded, before miming sleep, making silly snoring noises. He would stay up for a bit longer, but wanted his charge to get some rest. He’d pressed the other man hard today, after freeing him from a long confinement, so he figured the man might need a real sleep. With efficiency born of long practice, he packed away his edibles and pulled out a whetstone from the front pouch of his pack. Taking a seat in front of the shelter, a protective spot, he pulled out his machete and began to clean and sharpen it. And, as was his habit when alone, he began to sing an old folk song to himself in a clean, clear, light tenor, an ode to the stars.

It was restful to lay down and watch the small fire, flames jumping and snapping as they burned through damp spots or pockets of air within the wood. Though the more he stared at the warm orange glow of firelight, the harder it was to keep his eyes open. Especially with Jim singing the soothing song. After a few minutes, Khan began to nod off, finding rest, feeling taken care of and safe.
Chapter 2

Jim paused at the base of a huge tree and gestured for Khan to sit a moment. He pulled out one of his canteens and offered it to the other man, saying one of the words he’d managed to pick up so far, “Water.” With his other hand, he pulled out his compass and made sure of his bearing, before glancing up at the afternoon sun, which beamed down hot and bright through the canopy. Sighing once, he leaned against the sheltering tree, setting his machete down beside him and pulling out his other canteen to sip from. He also snagged a bar of chocolate and broke off a piece for each of them. “Chocolate.”

"Thank you." Khan said, accepting the water and chocolate gratefully. He drank from the canteen slowly, then bit off a piece of chocolate, then drank again. He still did not know where they were going, but Jim seemed to have some sort of plan. Still, he had many questions for his guide. "Jim." He started out, getting his attention, then used two fingers to touch his own lips, then gestured to Jim, repeating his name. "Jim." Then gestured to his own lips once more. "Khan." He wanted Jim to teach him words, and this was the only way he could convey this idea, Jim's words to Khan's words.

"You're welcome." Jim looked at his companion and cocked his head with a puzzled smile. "Khan?" he asked, wondering what the man was trying to convey to him. He liked the way the other man said his name, as there was a friendliness and warmth there that had only taken a day to form, a few precious hours between them. If this was an example of the man, he could see why the people of the time had revered him enough to make him the center of their temple.


Jim listened and watched and slowly nodded his head, thinking he understood what the other man wanted. He placed his hand on the trunk next to Khan’s and said, “Tree. Tree. Is that what you want?” The idea was a pleasant one for him, too, since he wanted to learn how to speak to Khan.

"Tree." Khan repeated back with a nod, wanting to expand their vocabulary with each other, even if it were for simple objects and not full conversations. "Tree." He said again, patting the trunk thoughtfully as he looked around the spot they had chosen to rest. Then considered, since they had stopped at mid-day, perhaps that was a good example. Pointing up to the sun with two fingers, Khan said. "Mid-day." Held the position of his hand, then tipped his arm towards the east. "Sun-rise." Then back to the sky above them. "Mid-day." And finally to the west. "Sun-set." Before repeating all three in order. "Sun-rise. Mid-day. Sun-set."

“Tree,” Jim repeated in Khan’s language and grinned easily, pleased with this. But then Khan went through a series of actions, which Jim originally interpreted as being a word for sun, but soon realized was something else. He narrowed his eyes and shook his head a few times, not quite sure what Khan meant. With a little frown, he rubbed his chin and snapped his fingers in thought, before diving into his pack and digging deep for his journal. Pulling it and a pencil out, he opened to an empty page and drew the sun on the top part. “Sun.” He pointed to the object in the sky and then back to his drawing. “Sun.”

Khan watched Jim search through his bag for something and was astonished when he started to use pencil and paper. "You can write? You must be very educated." Khan said, then studied the picture and the gesture to the sun. "Sun." Khan repeated back, then offered his hand, palm up, asking for the writing tool and paper.
“But what’s your word for it?” Jim asked, even as he handed over the journal and pencil, which had been his intention to begin with. “Sun,” he repeated and then pointed to the picture and to Khan. “Khan, sun?”

"Jim. Sun. Khan. Sun." Khan said with a smile, pleased that Jim was willing to learn his words as well, and not allow the learning to go one-way. "This is wonderful." Khan said, examining the pencil now that he had it in hand. He scribbled a little on the paper to give an idea of the texture and use of it. Never mind the quality of the paper, which was exceptional compared to the thick, rough parchment, linen, or animal skins they used to write on in his time. But now he had a chance to draw what he meant. He drew a line to represent the horizon, and on one end of the spectrum he drew a sun, with an arrow pointing upwards for sun-rise. Then on the other end of the spectrum he drew another sun, with an arrow pointing down for sun-set.

Jim studied the drawing and nodded understanding. “Oh, I get it! Sunrise.” He pointed to the sun with the arrow pointing upward, thinking of how Khan had been gesturing east. “Sunset.” He pointed to the sun with the arrow going down, for the gesture to the west.” He considered the third word and said, “Midday?” He looked at the sun as it currently stood over head. “Oh ... huh ... noon?”

"Yes!" Khan exclaimed. "Sun-rise. Sun-set. Mid-day." He said again, this time repeating the gestures. Though noon was not in his vocabulary, as specific times of day were not assigned in his language, only the events, such as the rise and fall of the sun.

“Sunrise. Sunset. Monday. Noon. Or midafternoon. Or just afternoon. English is a problem that way,” Jim said with a little nod and grin. He pointed to the writing implement. “Pencil. Pencil. Probably not one you have a word for, huh?”

"Sun-rise. Sun-set." Khan repeated back, then was unsure what word Jim was giving him for mid-day. So he moved on to the subject of the writing tool. "Pencil." He said, contemplating the equivalent in his own language. Chisels. But that was not the same. This item was not used to engrave rock or gold. There was a paint brush, and that was used for painting the walls or certain kinds of poetic calligraphy. But again, this was not the same. This was only one color. So he simply repeated back the word, "Pencil." That was now the word that would be used in his language.

Jim grinned and nodded at the other man eagerly. “This is great. We’ll learn how to speak to each other in no time! But now, we have to keep going.” He reached for the journal and pencil and asked, “Please? Please, Khan?” hoping the man would understand the request. They needed to get everything put away and hit the trail again. Jim had a fairly aggressive target to reach in terms of mileage.

Thinking that Jim wanted to draw something else now, Khan gave the pencil and paper back. Though as the items were packed away, he understood it was time for them to keep going. With a sigh, Khan got to his feet again, wishing they had more time to communicate. Also wishing he understood why they were on the move all the time. And why there were no other people around. But still these pieces of information had to wait for another time.

Jim slung the pack on and took Khan’s forearm again with a smile. “Thanks for being so good about this. I know it must make no sense to you. Your trust does mean a lot to me, Khan. I promise, I’ll explain everything once we can understand each other better.” He hefted his machete and headed back into the jungle, covering ground with his long strides.

Following after Jim once more, Khan did not feel the same rush to keep going as Jim did, but kept pace with him anyway. Still, he enjoyed the sights of the jungle, the flowering plants and animals that would scurry across their path or retreat to the trees when they got too close.
Jim froze suddenly as a loud explosion sounded from well behind them. He glanced back over his shoulder in the direction of Khan's temple and said, "Seems the Marcuses were less willing to squeeze in than I was. I hope they brought down the whole entrance and have to dig it out." He took a deep breath and nodded a few times. "But that means they'll probably find out the center of the temple is missing. We haven't left much of a trail, but they'll start trying to follow it tomorrow." He picked up his pace now, the machete singing its deadly hum and clang.

Khan however was completely startled, as were the birds of the upper jungle canopy who suddenly started to cry out to each other in warning as they took flight. He had no context for anything in the world that could make such a noise. "Jim! Jim!" He cried out to him and hurried after to put a hand on his arm. "Jim?"

Jim turned and put a hand on Khan's chest, over his heart, to try and soothe him, remembering the man had probably never heard such a noise before. "I know. It's frightening. But we're alright, Khan. Everything is alright." He smiled reassuringly and said, "Dynamite." He gestured in the direction of the sound. "Dynamite."

"Dynamite." Khan repeated back, but again had no context for this in his own language and understanding of the world. Nothing he knew was that loud. So he kept extra close to Jim now, a hand either clenched onto his clothes at the center of his back, or on his shoulder while Jim wielded the machete to get them through the jungle.

Jim regretted the fright Khan must be feeling and tried to reach back to brush a hand over his arm or shoulder or chest periodically to reassure him and keep their connection. But he pushed harder than ever to get them as far from the Marcus' expedition as possible. By the time night began to dim the skies, they were several miles ahead of his initial schedule.

He slowed down his pace and selected the base of a friendly tree to settle for the night, putting down his pack. Before starting the ritual of camp preparation, he turned to Khan and placed both hands on his shoulders. "Are you alright?" he asked softly. "I really wish you could understand me." He gestured to the tree and said, "Tree. We're going to stop here for the night. Sleep." He put his hands under his head, like a pillow, and pretended to snore. "Sleep."

Khan simply stared at Jim, even with both sides desperately wanting the other to understand, there simply was no way to explain things at this time. "Tree." Khan agreed. "Sleep. We will sleep here."

Jim nodded, hoping the last sentence meant what he thought it meant. "We will sleep here. I'll keep you safe, Khan." He paused and chewed on his lower lip before stepping forward and giving Khan a hug. "Hug," he said, arms tightening briefly around the other man. "Hug."

Oh. Oh, this was friendly. Not at all what Khan expected. It was perhaps also a little culture shock, as generally Khan, the Great Desert Lion, was the one to initiate physical contact, if it was allowed. But that was a long time ago. And things were different now. "Jim. Khan. Hug." Khan said, accepting the gesture, though did not know why he was receiving it now.

"Hug?" Jim asked, hoping for the word in Khan's language. He stepped back and looked into Khan's eyes with a smile.

"Hug." Khan said again in English, then added the term he knew it as. "Embrace." In his language, this was the way of expressing such a gesture.

"Embrace."
\textsuperscript{2}Jim repeated easily and gestured for Khan to sit down. "I'll get you some food while I make up our campsite." He knelt to open his pack and pulled out their food stash, setting it before Khan. "Eat whatever you want. We'll get to the horses by mid-afternoon tomorrow, and they have
lots of provisions with them. Food you’ve probably never even seen. He pretended to put things in his mouth and chew and pointed to the food. “Eat.”

Mid-afternoon was a familiar word. Jim had used it in terms of mid-day. So something about mid-day. Tomorrow. Khan continued to listen and watch, then repeated back "Eat." And then held one hand like a bowl, and used his other like a spoon to mime eating from his hand. He nodded once to confirm before reaching for the food that Jim had shared with him previously.

“Right!” Jim enthused at the word and launched himself into camp duties. In fifteen minutes, he had their shelter erected with a bed of moss and a ring of stones for the fire that night. “Perfect. What have you left for me?” He sat beside Khan and reached for the nuts, grinning at the taste. “These are so good. I’m looking forward to getting more of these … some more variety.”

"Jim, coffee?” Khan asked, pointing to the fire, wanting Jim to make it again. He smiled at the strange sort of companion he had made, who did not seem to mind that sometimes their conversations were one-sided. But it was good to talk aloud, even so.

Jim nodded and looked at the night sky, wanting to wait a few more minutes. But the hopeful tone in Khan’s voice made him decide that a few minutes wouldn’t really matter. “Coffee,” he agreed and dug out his box of matches. “Match,” he said, holding one up for Khan to see. “Match.” He offered it to Khan to try and strike.

"Match!” Khan said, excited to give it a try again. This time he managed to light it first time, then started the kindling on fire. He beamed, thrilled to have fire at his fingertips and to warm his feet once more.

“Fire,” Jim said, pointing at the flames. “Fire.” He dug out his coffee and began to prepare them both some of the rich brew. “It’s a good thing we’re only a half day away from the horses or I’d run out of coffee. That I don’t have enough of for more than a couple of days for just me. Never expected to be sharing my coffee.” He sniffed the aroma and made a deeply appreciative noise.


Jim applauded to show that Khan had gotten them all right. “Fire. Water. Coffee. Sunrise. Sunset. Embrace. Sleep. Tree.” He looked hopefully at Khan, fairly confident he had spoken them all in the right order and with a decent accent, but wanting to be certain.

"Tree!” Khan said with a laugh. He had forgotten. But he nodded and smiled at Jim. "Jim." He said, then made a point to clap his hands as well to congratulate his effort. Then with a pleased and satisfied sigh, Khan returned to lightly, but steadily eating their evening meal.

Jim brewed the coffee strong and poured each of them a tin mug full. He added his brown sugar teaspoon to his and gestured to the other man and the sugar. “Would you like some?” he asked and held a teaspoon of the sugar above Khan’s cup. “Would you like to try it this way?”

“What is that?” Khan only knew coffee as it was, a dark, smooth drink. And though this was not the coffee he remembered, adding something to it seemed very strange. He touched his finger twice to his tongue, to indicate taste, rather than speech, as he asked. "Jim?”

“Sugar,” Jim said and than offered Khan his coffee, which already had the sugar added. “Here, go ahead and try mine. See if you like it or not.” He held the cup closer to Khan to encourage him. “If you do, I can add it to yours and if not … well, I’ll just get to hoard it for myself. I’m happy either
"Sugar." Khan said, then accepted the cup with the sugar already added, though eyed the other one to make sure it had not been spoiled yet. He took a sip and then made a face, offering the cup back almost immediately to Jim. "No. No. No. Sugar." He said with a shake of his head to make sure there was no confusion on the issue.

Jim laughed at the reaction and said, “Well, that was an obvious reaction.” And then he playfully pretended to add the sugar anyway. “I mean, you obviously wanted the sugar, right?”

"No! No! No!"  Khan waved his hands furiously to stop Jim, frowning as he reached for the drink, not wanting it spoiled.

Jim snickered some more and handed the cup over to Khan without diluting it with sugar. He stashed the sugar for later use and sipped his own, sweetened coffee. Gesturing with his cup, he said, “Sugar,” and then pointing to Khan’s cup, he said, “No sugar.”  Picking up another handful of nuts, he held them out to the other man. “Nuts.”

Khan examined his cup carefully, tilting it slightly to see if he could see anything in it. Satisfied that it looked alright, he took a sip. Good. There was nothing in it after all. "No sugar."  He drank a little more, then picked out a few of the nuts he preferred. "Nuts."

Jim laughed some more at Khan and said, “Oh, you’re hilarious, Khan. Thank you for making me laugh.”  He settled back into the duff on the ground and looked up at the night sky with a soft smile. “I wish we had met in a little easier way, on one of our old expeditions, before the Marcuses. Although, if my mom got one look at you, I’d never be able to even talk to you. She’d never allow you out of her sight.”  He glanced at Khan and said, “You’re mine, Khan. I’m not letting her monopolize you.”  He snorted at himself and leaned back into the trunk. “If I were betting on the event, I’m sure I’d bet on her.”

Khan listened to Jim speak, then picked up on a word he had heard Jim use several times before. “Jim?” He prompted. "Marc ah sus ?" He did not know what a Marcuses was, but Jim kept talking about it so he thought he would try to understand it.

Jim stared at Khan for a long moment and then shook his head, gesturing between them and their mouths. “We don’t have enough words yet for that conversation,” he said with a shake of his head. “No, Khan.”  He looked sad for a moment and said, “We’ll just keep learning, and someday, I can tell you all about the Marcuses.”

This earned a deep frown from Khan. No? Had he asked something wrong? Or perhaps Jim did not know how to communicate this concept of 'Marcusus' to him. He gave a short, but heavy sigh. He did not like being told no.

Jim couldn’t help but chuckle again at the expression on Khan’s face, which was a pout of the best sort. He made a frowny face and pointed at the expression. “Sad.” He made a huge smile face and said, “Happy.” He than imitated Khan’s expression almost perfectly and said, “Pouty.”

Well, Jim was just teasing him now. Khan gave another small huff, then relaxed. "Jim. Happy." He did have a nice smile. Then after a few minutes, Khan said, "Khan. Sleep." He crawled into the sheltered Jim had made and laid out on his side once again. "Jim. Sleep." He said by way of inviting him to lay down too.

“Oh are you ordering me around, your majesty?” Jim asked with another grin. He held up his cup and said, “Jim, coffee.” He considered Khan with a bit of a soft smile on his face as he sipped and
said, “You probably were some sort of royalty. Emperor Khan? King Khan? Rajah Khan?”

What were these names? Was Jim making fun of him? A bit annoyed with this, and his invitation being declined, Khan turned over on his other side. He wanted to settle in for the night, and having his back to the fire was not bad. At least the smoke from the fire helped his clothing smell good, as he desired to wash, but their traveling did not allow for it.

Jim blinked a few times at this sign of grumpiness from Khan, but shrugged it off with a grin. He wasn’t going to let his coffee go to waste, even for his new friend. However, he did not plan to linger long in the drinking, polishing off the coffee with a few satisfied swigs. Putting out the fire and making sure the embers had snuffed out, he stood and toed off boots and socks, before going to sit next to Khan. He chose the side Khan faced for the moment and looked into his face. “No Khan sad,” he said. “Happy.”

Khan lightly opened his eyes when he noticed Jim moving about. Then tried to focus when Jim started to talk to him. Why was he teasing him before? What was he saying about him? "Khan. Sleep." He said, not wanting to be frustrated by their exchanges, but finding it difficult to communicate in such simplistic ways. It made it near impossible to share complex thoughts or concerns.

“You were someone powerful,” Jim said with a smile that softened his whole face into something friendly. “Listen to you growl at me.” He deliberately made his entire face as appealing as possible, eyes getting wide and pleading. “Jim, sleep ?” he asked and pointed next to Khan. “Please. Please?” He made sure to put the note of pleading into his tone.

"Khan, sleep. Jim, sleep." Khan said in agreement. He relaxed a little more now that Jim was trying to make amends with him. Or at least, that was how he perceived it. And so he reached out and placed his hand on Jim's forearm, holding onto him in a similar way to how they walked together on occasion. "Sleep. Sleep."

“Thank you,” Jim said with a nod and wink, before moving to lie on the other side of Khan. “Sleep.” He yawned and stretched himself out with a little sigh. “Goodnight, Khan. Sleep well.” He lightly pressed a foot against Khan’s leg, connecting them together.
Jim paused at the edge of the forest and put a hand on Khan’s shoulder to urge him to stay still and silent. He carefully sheathed his machete and studied the terrain ahead, where the trees thinned and a more open savannah like landscape beckoned. But the lessening of trees meant the loss of cover and exposure of Jim and his companion to the eyes of others. So, Jim paused a few moments and surveyed the area, making sure there was nobody and nothing unexpected that met his eyes.

Ahead of them, about a quarter mile away, six horses stood and grazed, two with riders already in the saddle, obviously waiting for someone to appear. They both carried long rifles and scanned the horizon almost incessantly.

Jim turned to Khan and wished he could tell him to be careful. “Khan, with Jim,” he said and took his arm. “Jim.” He indicated himself. “In front.” He moved to stand so that Khan was behind him. “Khan, there.” He pointed to how Khan stood. “Yes?”

"Yes.” Khan said, understanding that Jim was being cautious, and that he was to stay close. He did not know why, or what threat there was, other then the fact that they were leaving the jungle. But now for the first time, Khan could see other people. Yes, other people in the world still existed, it wasn’t just Khan and Jim, but it had felt like it for a few days. Now there were other people in sight, and they had horses! He was quite excited about that, but would still listen to his guide, who knew their customs and traditions, or dangers in this world.

Jim smiled at Khan and nodded, “Good man.” He wanted to draw his gun, but at the same time, didn’t want to make the other men nervous. They were here with the horses and supplies Jim had ordered, but he suspected it was mostly because he had only paid them half upfront. And they knew he might return with very valuable items, which he had. He glanced over his shoulder at Khan once and nodded, before squaring his shoulders and marching forward with a confident air.

“Hello,” he called out in their native tongue as they got near, coming to a stop with enough distance to prevent himself from being flanked. He rested one hand near his gun and waited for the response.

Both men instantly faced Jim and Khan when they appeared from out of the jungle, guns at the ready. One of them trotted out a short ways at recognizing Jim and said, “We are glad to see you. Here are your horses and supplies, as promised.”

There was some tension in the air, but Khan did not know its source. But he did wonder about the men and the horses, and the spears that they held. Were they horse traders? Was Jim trying to get them horses? Or just pass through their lands? Khan remained behind his guide, listening, trying to understand the exchange.

Jim smiled and nodded, continuing to speak in the native language, “I have your payment with me. I’ll just toss it to you after my friend and I are mounted and about to be on our way.”

The other man’s face hardened, and he said, “We don’t think you paid us enough for our services.” He gestured with his rifle to Jim and said, “I believe you may have collected some valuables that will make a very suitable payment.”

Jim suppressed a sigh, annoyed, but not exactly surprised by the demand. His eyes tracked right, to the other rider, who had his rifle trained on both of them. “You know, we worked out the money together.”
“We are reopening the negotiation,” the other man sneered. “Show me what’s in the bag!”

Khan did not like the tone of voice the men were using. Nor did he like that they were threatening them with their spears. But he could not help Jim in the way that he wanted. After all, he did not know the details of the situation, either. Though he felt that if it came to it, he could still fight these men, but not like he once had. He might be muscle and bone, but the truth was, there was more bone, then muscle to him right now. And while in his prime state he would have been able to pull the men off their mounts and defeat them in battle, he was not in a position to do so right now.

“You want to know what’s in the bag,” Jim said and shifted his weight to stand even more securely in front of Khan. “Fine.” He slung the bag off his shoulders, right first, so that the bag swung over his left shoulder and toward his right hip. Gripping the strap with his left hand, he hurled the bag at the near rider with his left arm and drew his gun with his right hand, barely looking as he shot the far man off his horse, which reared and screamed in response to the noise and his rider’s plunge to the ground. Jim braced himself and twisted his body to the left as soon as the shot left his gun, so that he squeezed off a shot that caught the near rider, still fumbling with bag and rifle, square in the right shoulder and toppled him off his mount.

That was no spear! Khan yelled, almost as startled as the horses. Something very strange just happened. Jim reacted, now both men were injured, or dead! He did not know what to think. "Jim!" He clung to the back of Jim's shirt. "Who are these men? What did you just do? Are we stealing horses?"

Jim put a gentle hand on Khan’s shoulder and patted a couple of times, eyes still on the two downed men. Both of their horses had scattered, and the other horses were nervous, tossing their heads and stomping, but their hobbles kept them in place. The men remained on the ground, the near one groaning and trying to lever himself up, but the second one was still and almost obviously dead, limbs askew. Jim’s attention snapped to the nearer man, and he approached rapidly, kicking away the man’s rifle and saying in a harsh, commanding tone, “Get up!”

The man groaned again, but climbed to his feet, holding his shoulder, which bled through his fingers.

“I would have paid you the rest and let you go peacefully on your way,” Jim said, “if you hadn’t decided to cheat me. I guess you didn’t listen too well to people who told you that it was a bad idea to try and cheat James Kirk.” He gestured to the man’s belt. “Remove your guns ... slowly. Any false moves, and you’ll join your friend.” There was no trace here of the kind man who had saved Khan and led him safely through the jungle. This was a different man- fierce, cold and completely in charge.

Not knowing how to help, or even if he should help, or how to follow any instruction if Jim gave any, Khan remained behind his guide as he promised to do. Though as Jim seemed to be getting his way, Khan risked a few glances to the horses. "They are very nice animals." He said, much calmer.

The injured man dropped his gun and looked at Jim with fear in his eyes.

“Now, walk. That way.” Jim pointed toward the jungle. “And keep walking until you get to the trees. Understand?”

“Yes,” the man said and slowly, fearfully, began to make his way up the same path Jim and Khan had just come down. He bypassed Jim’s companion by a wide margin, not wanting to incite any further anger in his direction.

Jim watched him for about five minutes and then turned to Khan. “Khan,” he said and gestured for
the man to follow. He didn’t delay, snagging his pack and slinging it back on, before hurrying toward the dead man to collect the second rifle and other weapons and on to the hobbled horses.

“Horse, Khan,” he said, pointing at the two saddled horses and Khan in turn. “Horse.” He tied one rifle and the two collected guns on to the pack of one of the two pack horses and unhobbled them.

"Horse." Khan approached one of the horses, who seemed unsure about everything that had just happened. Khan was unsure too, so that had that in common. But he stroked the horse’s neck and began to introduce himself in his language. Holding the horse’s head close to his chest to give it a secure feeling like it was nuzzling another horse, Khan quickly made friends with the animal before pulling himself up onto its back.

Jim grinned as Khan easily worked with the horse and sprung nimbly on his back. He noted that he’d chosen the finer of the two mounts and smiled a little. Hustling to unhobble both riding animals, he glanced toward the direction he’d sent the would-be robber in, nodding once to see that he’d just reached the trees. He’d leave the other two horses for the man, who would survive his wound as long as he didn’t do anything foolish. Jim couldn’t really be sorry, considering he was certain the two men who have gunned them both down once they’d taken everything of value. He corralled his own horse and leaped aboard with casual ease, stroking the animal’s neck. “Here we go,” he said and nudged his horse forward.

With a click of his tongue, Khan urged his horse forward, riding was comfortable and easy, as if he had been doing it since he could walk. And he probably had, but he could not remember exactly that long ago. He kept pace with Jim and smiled at him, very happy to be riding. Even though he did not understand the circumstances of them taking the horses or the weapons that were used; he found he no longer could be too upset about it.

Jim led along the two pack horses and moved his horse to walk next to Khan’s, easing back into the saddle now that they were moving. He blew out a long breath and turned toward his companion, saying, “I’m sorry, Khan,” in an abjectly sincere voice. “That was not what I wanted for your introduction back to other people.” He pulled out his gun and examined it in the sunlight, frowning a little, before reloading the empty chambers.

"Jim." Khan said to get his attention. "Jim-" He said again, then pointed to the gun, then to his own lips, asking Jim to tell him what the thing was called. He saw that it caused injury and death, but did not know how, as it had been so fast, he did not see how it worked.

Frowning again down at the gun, Jim said softly, “This is a bad thing about humans, Khan. We’ve learned how to kill each other more effectively.” He held the object up for Khan to see. “Gun. Gun.” He aimed it at a rock in front of them and sent the piece skittering across the ground with a series of deadeye shots, done almost nonchalantly. “Mom taught me to shoot, too.”

Khan’s horse was startled in place, not because of the gunshot necessarily, because it seemed accustomed to such things, but more as a reaction to Khan who had suddenly gotten quite tense. "Gun." He said in awe and disbelief, still unable to see how it worked, only that it worked quite effectively. It was aimed like a bow and arrow, but did not require two hands. Just one. Just point. And kill. That was something he would think about for a while.

Jim nodded and said, “Bad,” in a low tone, before putting the gun away. He allowed them to ride in silence for a few moments, before slinging his pack to the front and opening it carefully. He pulled out one of the jewel encrusted ram’s horn, which was wrapped in cloth, and held it out for Khan to see. “This is yours.”

Oh. He knew what that was. Khan was quiet a moment, then stroked his fingers down the bridge of the ram skull, petting the animal it had once belonged to. “I was buried with this.” He said, then tried
to express it in the English terms he knew. "Sun-set. Khan. Sleep. Khan. Sun-set." He said, trying to express the idea of the end of his life, and the long sleep a person takes. He frowned a little knowing the vocabulary was not accurate, but perhaps enough.

Jim nodded and said, "Sleep." He gave a sudden gasp, clasped at his heart and keeled over in the saddle, just hanging there for a moment, as if gone. He peeked up at Khan and said, "Death. Death." He hauled himself back upright and frowned a little at Khan. "But you didn’t die, did you? So why were you buried? They must have thought it was for all time."

Yes, that was the concept he was trying to convey. "Khan. Death." He said with a small nod. He stroked the ram skull again. "Death." Then he gestured to himself, "Khan. Sun-rise." He had not died, he continued to live. And he did not know why, or how, he survived when his friends and companions were turned to dust at his feet.

Jim wished Khan had volunteered his word for death, but the other man obviously wanted to discuss this with him. And that was far more important. He eased his horse close enough to reach out and lightly put a hand on Khan’s nearest arm. "Jim happy Khan sunrise."

Khan sighed deeply, then smiled at Jim. "Thank you." Jim was happy he was alive. Even though he could not explain it. Nor express what he was feeling. His fears. His concern. His uncertainty. His confusion. Nor could he explain his circumstances. The man he was before.

“You’re welcome,” Jim said with a smile and moved his horse away from the other, since her ears were beginning to flatten. “She’s not very happy being so close to another horse.” He stroked her neck gently and said, “They need names.” He considered her for a moment and then, slowly, a huge grin spread across his face. He pointed at his mare, who was a brilliant chestnut, and said, “Sunrise.” He gestured to the dark bay gelding that Khan rode and said, "Sunset."

Khan smiled at this, understanding that Jim was not confused about what a sunrise or sunset was, but was in fact naming the horses. "Sunrise. Sunset." He repeated back, giving his horse a pat on his shoulder. He then glanced back to one of the pack horses, getting a sense of him before deciding on a name. "Coffee." He said, indicating to the horse that was also a dark bay, but had white socks and a bald face.

“Coffee,” Jim said and nodded at the other man with a laugh. He glanced back at the other horse, which was a somewhat washed out gray and asked with mischief, “Tree?” It was, after all, one of the few other nouns he knew in Khan’s language. And calling the horse something like ‘Thank You’ seemed mean.

Khan scoffed, "Sugar!" Jim had an interesting sense of humour he did not quite understand, but he was starting to get used to it. But it was hard, especially with the communication barrier, to express themselves as exactly and as precisely as possible, instead of with teasing.

“Sugar,” Jim agreed and then asked, “Khan, sugar?” They must have had some sort of sugar back in Khan’s time. Most civilizations had some sort of sweetener, anyway, especially in the highest classes. And he still believed that was where Khan was from.

Khan considered a moment, giving the literal English translation before speaking it in his own tongue. "Tree. Sugar. Khan. Sugar cane." That the the prominent source that he knew sugar from, but it was derived from a plant and was unsure what the difference was between the sugar he knew and the kind that Jim used.

“Tree sugar,” Jim mused. “I don’t know of any trees growing sugar, unless you count syrup, but I don’t think that’s what you mean. Sugarcane. Sugarcane. Well, it’s slow, but I’m learning.” He
pulled out his compass and brought his horse to a stop, figuring it was time to properly get their bearings and head out. “So, Khan, my plan is to get to the nearest port and hop the fastest boat back to the United States. Mom and Chris are waiting there for me. I have more than enough money for me, but I don’t know about you. We need more than just passage for you. Clothes for sure. And luggage. That’s all going to cost money and be difficult to acquire ... well, some of it.”

Easing his own horse to a stop, Khan leaned down and hugged his neck with a sigh, pleased to have something familiar in his life. He knew horses. He didn't know guns, or the clothing Jim wore, or the language, but horses were still horses. But he perked up when Jim mentioned his name, though still did not understand the context of what he was talking about.

Jim hopped off his horse and walked over to Khan, keeping the reins in one hand. He lifted the compass and showed it to the other man. “Alright, we’re going to try something difficult. I’m glad the sun is starting to go down.” He aligned himself so the needle on the compass pointed due north, but indicated the setting sun and the base arrow pointing to the ‘W.’ “West. West.”

"Sun-set. West.” Khan said, comprehending his concept since they had already established sun-rise and sun-set. Those were universal directions. "Khan. Jim. West?” He asked, trying to determine if that was their direction of choice, or the opposite.

Jim pointed in that direction now. “West.” He pointed to the way the arrow pointed to the W in the compass. “West.” He than did an exact pivot and pointed in that direction, before indicating how the compass pointed to the E. “East. East.”

"East.” Khan repeated, sharing his gaze. "Sun-rise. East.” So where were they going? Jim's home? To meet up with others, like those men that Jim had fought with? A village? Were they going to continue on alone, now that they had horses? Khan tried not to be frustrated by this lack of information, as things unfolded gradually between them.

Jim repeated the same things for north and south, showing him how the compass pointed each time. And then he handed the compass to Khan. “Khan. South.” He climbed up on his horse and waited to see if the other man understood. “South.”

Khan turned the compass in his hand, intrigued by the arrow. It was fascinating to watch it move, no matter which way he turned it. But eventually he got the arrow to match up with north, then pointed to south. "South!” He said, then looked to Jim for confirmation.

“South,” Jim confirmed. “Khan, Jim, south.” He pointed that direction again and urged his horse forward, still leading the two pack horses close behind. “South. North. East. West.” He gestured each way again as they rode. And then mixed it up. “Southwest. Southeast. Northeast. Northwest.” He glanced at Khan to see if that made sense to his companion.

Was Jim joking with him again? That did not make any sense. Khan's concept of spacial awareness was much more black and white and this mixing of directions was not something he grasped easily. "Khan. Jim. South." That is what he knew and understood.

Jim glanced over a Khan and suppressed a smile at the look of near grumpy confusion on the man’s face. He found the other man very expressive and enjoyed the myriad of expressions Khan showed him. With patience he said, “Yes, south,” and pointed the direction they were going. “West,” he went out, gesturing in that direction. And then he turned his horses so they were going in the space directly between south and west. “Southwest.” He indicated the way he was headed in that moment.

"South. West." So they were going south and west. But to his mind, they could only do one at any
given time. A little south, a little west. He shook his head as if the idea had given him a bitter taste in
his mouth he was trying to be rid of. Learning a new language was one thing. But learning a new
concept, with minimal communication was another.

“Well, it’ll do,” Jim said and pointed to the object Khan still held, his compass. “South. East. Khan.
Khan, southeast.” He loved to see the ideas and thoughts flash across the man's face, already
having realized Khan was exceptionally intelligent and learned very quickly. It made everything that
much easier, since there was so much to learn.

Except that now Khan was getting impatient. He turned the compass in hand, frowned, then offered
it back to Jim. "Jim. Horse. Jim." He wanted Jim to get back on his horse and lead them to where
they were going. "Jim. Horse."

Jim snorted a laugh at Khan and took the compass, taking one more quick bearing to be sure they
went the right way. “Yes, your Majesty. I see how it is. But since you don’t even know where
we’re going or what we’re doing, I don’t know why you’re demanding about it.” He bounded on to
his horse and rubbed a hand through his hair as he made the saddle, blowing out a little breath. “See,
this is why I avoid entanglements. People are nothing but problems.” Still, he lightly urged his horse
into an easy trot, heading for civilization.

With a soft grumble, Khan began to talk to Sunset. The horse flicked his ears back and forth listening
to Khan as he spoke, but had about as much understanding and comprehension as Jim. Even so,
Khan talked about where he was from and how long he had been alone and that everything
looked different to his eyes.

Jim overheard only some of Khan’s mumbling to the horse, which made him smile a little more. He
slowed the horses to allow them to drink from a river for a few moments and then waded them right
into the water, easing up his hold on the reins to allow his mare to swim in the deeper waters. He
glanced back at Khan as he rode and reached down to splash the river, easy in the saddle.

When they reached the other side, he urged his horses up the bank and stopped again at the other
side, looking out over the low plains before them, marked by low-growing shrubs and a few large
trees. He glanced back at Khan and asked, “Khan happy?”

Khan watched Jim lead the way and was impressed by these horses and the training they must have
to cross the river. So with some encouragement, he got Sunset to follow. On the other side, Khan
stroked his horse's neck in praise as he moved up to Jim's side. "Khan happy." He said, looking to
Jim first, then the grasslands stretching out before them.

“Good,” Jim said. “May I get off for a few moments without being grumped at?” Jim asked, before
hopping down to stretch out his legs without waiting for a response. He groaned a little at the
stiffness in his ass and back from the long ride after so many punishing days in the jungle. But not
wanting Khan to get impatient again, he picked up a light run of his own, urging the horses into a
trot. “Jim trot,” he told Khan as they bounced along. “Horse trot.”

"Why is he so strange?" Khan asked his horse. "Why does he run, when he could be riding." Khan
however was very satisfied to be riding and had no intention of dismounting unless he had to.

Jim narrowed his eyes in annoyance at the other man and asked, “How are we ever going to learn to
communicate if you ignore me?” He frowned and looked back to the front, keeping up his pace for
about another half an hour, before slowing again. He glanced back at the sun, which was now
descending rapidly into the west, and then scanned their surroundings again. Stopping, he
considered the vista and their potential sites for a camp. There were not as many options on a
savannah as a jungle, and he didn’t want to leave them completely in the open.
Selecting one of the only tall trees in the vicinity, though it was still a bit of ride away, he pointed and said, “Khan, tree.” He glanced at his compass. “Southeast.” He maneuvered to the side of his mount and leaped up again, landing lightly in the saddle. “No dawdling.” And suddenly, he was cantering away.

“One more run, then you can have a rest.” Khan said to his horse. With a click of his tongue, they headed off towards the tree, though Sunset was a strong runner and seemed to want to get ahead. But Khan kept him back, as he did not want to separate himself from his guide.

The light faded rapidly around them as they approached their destination for the evening, and Jim eased the horses back to let them cool off before they arrived. He did an ‘emergency dismount’ for pure fun right before the horses slowed to a walk and landed easily in the dust, allowing himself to walk out his aches, as well. Easing the horses to a halt, he rubbed the soft velvet nose of Sunset and said, “Good girl. Such a good girl.” He tossed a set of hobbles to Khan and began to hobble his three horses, making sure they didn’t wander far.

After Khan dismounted, he gave his horse some attention and affection. Scratching a spot around his cheek and down his neck, thanking him for a good day. After taking off the saddle, he checked Sunset's legs, ensuring they were clean and dry for the night. "You are very handsome, my friend." Khan said, then hobbled his front legs, copying what Jim had done with the other horses. "Have a rest.” He said, giving the horse one final pat on the shoulder.

Jim grinned at how easily Khan worked with his horse. He pointed at Coffee and asked, “Khan, Coffee?” to see if he could take care of the pack horse’s gear. He needed to do a complete inventory of their packs and make sure they hadn’t been shortchanged. It was always a risk when one operated as Jim did, having to trust strangers to some of his well being. He eased the loads and pack frame off of Sugar and set them well out of path of the grazing horses. He took the saddle and bridle off of Sunrise, as well, putting them by the supplies.

Khan perked up at the mention of coffee, then remembered that he had named the horse by that name. He nodded once. "Khan. Coffee.” He said, indicating that he would take care of the other horse too. He removed the gear with ease, despite looking quite frail, and then gave the horse some personalized attention as well before letting him head out with the others.

Jim chuckled at the hopeful expression and moved to set-up their camp, though he started by lighting a fire in a ring of stones and getting some coffee brewing. “There. You can have some as soon as it’s ready, Khan. Coffee.” He pointed to the brew already making the area smell wonderfully.

He put together a different style shelter, more heavily relying on brush and a few fallen branches from the large tree. Soon, however, he had a place for them to sleep and moved toward their supplies. He took a deep breath and opened the first bundle, grinning in relief to find the horse’s graze inside, used to supplement what they could browse on. And the second bundle had their cooking equipment and more general supplies, including ammunition for Jim’s gun and a couple of Bowie knives. He pulled one of those out and set it aside, before moving to the other horse’s packs. In here he found to his relief their food. A lot more diversity than they’d had in his pack alone.

As Khan settled to sit by the fire, he noticed Jim going through the bags. Though when he picked out one of the knives, he reached for it. He had never seen metal so smooth. "Look at this, you cannot even see the blacksmith hammer strikes.” Khan observed, but then caught a little of his reflection in the knife. It was distorted and unclear, but he could see the hollowed out features of his face and frowned. "I look so different."

“You didn’t even wait to let me give that to you,” Jim objected, before he chuckled again. “Well it is for you anyway.” He pointed to the object. “Knife. Khan knife.” He indicated the knife and then
Khan. “Khan knife.” Hoping his point was made and not expecting a word in return, he began to explore the contents of their foodstores. “Oh. Lentils. I can make some soup. There should be some dried ... yeah, here we go.” He sat down with the goods and one of the pots, beginning to put together some soup to boil over the fire.

"Khan, knife?” It was a gift? Great! Khan smiled and began to examine the hilt, getting a feel for it. Knives were familiar to him, but this one had such a different weight and shape to anything he knew, he would have to practice with it a little while before becoming completely comfortable.

“Yes,” Jim said and picked up the matching blade, flipping it neatly in the air and catching it again. “Bowie knife.” He liked the feel of the recently designed blade, made specifically for fighting purposes. In close combat, they were especially deadly. And one could carry them more easily than a machete into tight quarters. He returned to stirring the lentils, before reaching for their coffee. He grabbed one of their mugs and poured Khan’s undiluted coffee into it, before pouring his own. “Khan, coffee.”

"Thank you. Jim." Khan said and accepted the coffee with a smile. He took a few sips then held the mug close to his lap. He watched Jim cook for a bit before suggesting, "You should put onion and lime in the soup. That is what we do.” He said, pointing his finger at the lentils, not that Jim understood him.

“You’re welcome.” Jim tilted his head in question at Khan’s actions, before smiling at the other man. “Maybe you want to help.” He moved the large pack of foodstuffs and opened it for Khan to look at. “Food,” he said, indicating all of the various items in the bundle. “Khan, food?” He gestured to what he had in the pack and than to the lentil soup, boiling away now. Turning his attention back to it, he threw in some of the dried vegetables and some spices for flavor.

Khan leaned in to watch what Jim was putting into the soup pot. Then began to rummage through the bag. "Food. Onion. Food. Lime." He said, trying to explain what he was looking for. Fortunately onion was a food staple regional to the area, so he found one quickly and held it up triumphantly for Jim. "Food! Onion !"

Jim grinned and said, “Oh, you want some onion. Onion. Good idea.” He took the small vegetable, peeled it and quickly chopped it with his Bowie knife into tiny pieces and tossed it in the lentil soup. “Onion. Onion. Anything else?” He gestured to the rest of the food in the bag.

"Un-ion." Khan repeated back. "Un-ion!" He smiled, pleased that it had been added. "Now we need lime." He said, then used his finger and thumb to show that it was something small. But other then that, had no way to express that it was something sour, or green, or how it was meant to be added to the soup.

“You’re on the right,” Jim said with an encouraging smile at his companion. He offered him some of the other spices as options. “Any of these? Try them.” He had small packets of a variety of common spices, as well as a couple of rare ones. “Spices. Spices.”

"Spice." Khan said, without the extra ‘S’. He gave the small packets a sniff or taste and laughed to himself. He knew what these were. But they were still not what he had in mind, so he handed them back without adding any, except for dried garlic, to the soup. Feeling that they would just have to do without the lime, Khan gave Jim a simple nod then returned to drinking his coffee.

“You’re a plain kind of man; I can respect that,” Jim said with a nod and a smile. He stirred the pot slowly and made sure the soup was ready, before scooping the soup into bowls. He handed the bowl, with a spoon, to Khan. “I hope you like it. Lentils are some of my favorite.” He pulled out some dried meat and tore a piece up into small chunks, tossing it in the soup, before offering it to

Khan looked at what Jim was offering, unsure of it. So he put his finger to his nose, asking. "Jim? What does it smell like?" Then touched a finger to his tongue, also asking, "Jim? What does it taste like?"

“Uh, I don’t know what you’re asking,” Jim said regretfully. “It’s uh, beef. Try it?” He tore off a little piece and tossed it in his mouth, chewing. He offered another small piece to Khan. “Try?”

Accepting the piece of dried meat, Khan gave it a smell, inhaling deeply. Then started to tear it in half, seeing it break into strands, like muscle. "Horse?" He asked with an uncertain look.

Jim made a face and shook his head quickly from side to side. “No. No horse. No eat horse.” He stood and headed for the horses, giving each of them a hug to show he didn’t eat horses, before returning to sit by Khan again. “Cow. Moooo! Moo?” He did his best to imitate a cow noise.

Khan watched quietly and then laughed. "Moo!" He echoed back and lifted his hands to either side of his head to make horns with his fingers. "Bull." He nodded with understanding. "Thank you for your life, so that I may live." Khan began a small prayer, then dropped the bit of meat into his soup.

“Bull. Cow.” Jim echoed the laugh at his own ridiculous attempt at an impression and watched as Khan said something, reverently, before adding the meat. He wondered what that might be and vowed to learn eventually. “Good? Mmmmm?” He rubbed his stomach, licked his lips and made a humming sound to show enjoyment. “Good?”

Eating a little of the hot soup, Khan sighed, feeling better to have something in his stomach that was a bit more filling. "Good." Khan nodded, agreeing. "Good. Food."

“Eat,” Jim said and gestured to all of the other food in the pack. “Eat, Khan.” He dug into his own soup with a contented sound, pleased with the end result of his efforts. He wished for a little bread and maybe some liquor to go with it, but for the moment, everything was well. “So, today was a little exciting, huh? Seeing me shoot people and making a run for it. Getting some horses and changing our surroundings. The problem is, we’re going to meet a lot more people soon, and you’re obviously not like anyone else.”

"Khan. Eat. Food." He said, holding up his bowl of soup to show Jim, not understanding why he was telling him to eat, when he already was. But after that, he did not know what Jim was talking about, only that he was talking. And sometimes his tone reflected that he was asking a question, or at least seemed unsure. Either way, Khan did not know how to answer him.

“Oh, yes,” Jim agreed and scooted the pack forward in the direction of Khan. “This food.” He gestured to the food in the pack that was currently untouched. “Eat this.” He took some dried apples from the foodstuffs and made a positively indecent noise as he shoved them in his mouth and chewed. He offered some of the fruit more directly to Khan in hopes he would understand. “Apple.”

Khan considered for a moment, then put his bowl of soup down. Eat this too? Eat more? Jim had been good about ensuring they had meals and water. But for the first time, Khan worried that they would not have enough if they ate too much in one sitting. He simply had to trust that Jim knew what he was doing and had a plan moving forward. Reaching over, Khan picked out a piece of dried apple and frowned for a moment, thinking it looked familiar. And once it was in his mouth, he knew exactly what it was. "Apple! Apple!"

Jim grinned and nodded enthusiastically. “Apple. Apple. Jim likes apple.” He popped another in
his mouth and chewed and made happy noises. “Like. Mmm. Jim likes apple.” This was one of his first attempts to teach Khan something beyond the more simple nouns. This teaching was hard. He found himself realizing that he owed his mother even more credit and respect than ever. Ugh, she would be impossible if he ever explained that to her, though.

Khan thought about this, wanting to understand what Jim was trying to convey. "Jim. Happy. Food.” He said to start. "Jim. Happy. Apple. Jim likes apple.” He said looking for Jim to confirm that he understood the concept that was being expressed.

“Yes!” Jim said in triumph. “Khan likes apple. Jim likes apple. Likes?” He tried to prompt the word from the other man, waving one hand toward him hopefully. It was a slow, painful way to learn, but every step forward, no matter how small, made Jim practically light up inside.

Good, they were on the same page! They were understanding each other. "Khan likes apple." He agreed. "Khan likes horses. Khan likes coffee." He said with a smile, pleased by this small accomplishment. And so he returned to eating his soup, wanting to enjoy it first and foremost.

Jim made a face as Khan did not share his own language, but returned to his soup, as well. It was more important to get Khan to eat and regain a more healthy weight than anything else. Frankly, the man’s strength and stamina was impressive, given everything. Among all his other questions, Jim wondered how Khan possibly survived and why he got sealed into the temple in the first place. He polished off his bowl and grabbed the ladle, scooping out seconds and offering them to Khan. “More?”

Though he was only half done his meal when Jim offered to give him more, Khan accepted and offered his bowl, wanting a little more to keep the soup hot and fresh. "Thank you." He said, "Khan likes more." For now 'likes' would be quite useful it using almost complete sentences with one another.

Jim bowed his head in acknowledgement and said, “You’re welcome.” he filled his own bowl and tried to eat at a more leisurely pace, too used to just gobbling his food down. “I hope you’ll excuse my manners, Khan. I’m not used to company when I’m in the field anymore. I travel alone, so I’m rusty on being neat.” He chuckled and stretched out his body a bit, making a little noise of content. “Once we’re done, we’ll get you something else to wear. My spare clothes won’t fit well, but they’ll be better than the improvisation you’ve been wearing for days.”

As always, Khan listened carefully. Trying to understand Jim from context. In this case he understood "you're welcome" and he was beginning to understand the use of the term "I" as in referring to oneself, and then Khan's name. But even so, he did not know what Jim was talking about, in reference to himself. So he gave the other man a sympathetic look, then returned to eating his evening meal.

“Yeah, I know, this is ridiculous. But I’ve been told that just talking and hearing the language can help you learn some of it, at least.” Jim tossed another apple into his mouth and crunched away at the dried slice, pleasure slitting his eyes. “And it feels weird to sit here silently when I’ve got company. You’re good company, too, all things considered. Jim likes Khan.”

Khan tilted his head to the side and smiled. "Jim likes Khan?” He reached for his coffee, and said, "Khan likes Jim.” Before taking a sip. Even though more then once, Khan had been quite annoyed with Jim because they were not understanding each other, but that was no one's fault really. Jim had saved him after all. Was feeding him. And was looking after him, and protecting him from things like guns.

“Thank you,” Jim said with a beaming grin. “And thank goodness. We’d been in a fix if you didn’t
at least feel I was worth getting along with. I wish I could tell you what was going on. I promise, as soon as we have the words, I’ll do my best to explain. Even if there are still some holes. For now, how about I get you some new clothes?” He set aside his empty bowl and rose to his feet, heading for the other packs. “I should have something …”

As Jim got up and headed to the packs, Khan stopped drinking his coffee and sat still. "Jim? Horse?” Was Jim leaving? Had he spent this extra time making sure Khan was well fed because they were going their own ways now?

“No horse,” Jim reassured, hearing a note of worry in Khan’s voice. “Pack.” He knelt by the pack containing odds and ends and dug around, finally pulling out a couple of pairs of clothes, his back-ups. “Oh good, I was hoping I’d have more than one. When we get someplace to wash, we’re both taking a bath, too. I’m a mess, and you haven’t cleaned in millennia.” He carried the clothes back over to Khan, setting them down as he retook his seat.

"Pack.” Khan said as he reached out to touch the clothes. "Khan?” He asked, unsure if Jim had simply put these down, or if he was giving them for him to change into. The fabrics were still quite different from anything he had even known. The weave was so fine, he could not see where the strands started and ended. Perhaps clothing was not woven in the way he once knew.

“Khan,” Jim confirmed and lifted the two shirts. “This?” He held the shirt in his left hand out to Khan. “This?” He switched hands, pulling back the first shirt and holding out the second. “Khan like?” Feeling a bit like he was trying to make a sale, Jim showed Khan each of the shirts again.

“This?” Khan repeated back. "Khan like." He said, but now was unsure if Jim was teasing him with the items? Or if they were a gift? Or if he was expected to pay? "Jim-” He said, holding both hands out like a bowl, then bowed his head down slightly, "Khan?” He asked, asking for Jim to give him the item.

“Oh dear,” Jim muttered, seeing that Khan did not quite understand what he was trying to ask. So, he considered the two shirts and decided the blue was more Khan’s color. “Here you go.” He lightly set the blue shirt into Khan’s arms, just above the outstretched hands. “Khan. Shirt.” He folded the other one and set it aside carefully.

Once the gift was given and received, Khan pulled his head up and smiled. "Khan. Shirt. Thank you. Khan likes shirt.” He said and then ran his hands over the fabric again. Getting to his feet, Khan removed the blanket from over his shoulder and dropped it down around his hips, folding and tying it off so that it now wore like a skirt. Then putting the shirt on over his head, Khan managed to figure out the arm holes on his own and looked down at himself quite satisfied. "Good!"

The smile Jim wore tugged his mouth up in a pleasant fashion, and he moved to help Khan adjust the shirt, taking one pair of pants with him. “Well, it’s not perfect, but yeah, that’s better than the blanket. Khan shirt good!” He held up the pants he was carrying and measured them to Khan’s body. “A little short, and they’ll be a bit loose around the waist, but they should stay up, at least.” He held them out to Khan. “Khan, pants.”

"Khan. Pants." He echoed back as he held up the pants to examine. He was familiar with loose fitting clothes, as that was the style of his time, but the way Jim and the other men wore clothing, it was clearly much more fitted to each individual. So he removed the knot and the folds in the blanket to pull it off his hips, setting it aside so that he could pull the pants on. They felt different from anything he had known before, and he was not quite sure what to make of the zipper. "Jim?”

Jim had averted his eyes, even though Khan seemed to feel no shame, but looked back at his name. “Oh hey, that’s a better fit than I ... oh …” He chuckled a little. “Yeah, I forgot. First time you’ve
ever seen a zipper, huh? They are very handy. But a bit tricky for your first time.” He reached out for the pants and hovered a little bit away. “May I?”

"Jim?” Khan nodded and pulled his hands away so that Jim could help him. He was not shy, after all, he had been laid out naked with nothing but a locket and a gold shroud. And had ended up letting Jim dress him in the first place. He should perhaps be self conscious of how skinny he was, but did not think of himself as frail, so it was hard to even acknowledge that perhaps his frame looked unsightly to others.

“Excellent. Here we go.” Jim carefully zipped up the pants and studied how loosely they hung off of Khan’s thin frame. “Huh. Belt. Need a belt.” He looked around them and decided a rope was the best they could do, fetching it quickly and placing it through the belt loops and tying it just tight enough to keep the pants up. “There we go. Khan likes pants?” He stepped back and looked over Khan in his new clothes, nodding a few times in approval.

"Khan likes pants.” He said, feeling that they would do a much better job protecting his skin from large scratchy bushes while riding, or insect bites. They would still take some getting used to, but would do for now. "Good." He said with a nod and then sat down again. "Thank you."

“You’re welcome,” Jim said and gave Khan a little bow, imitating what the man had done before. “Jim likes Khan pants and shirt.” He was glad to be able to give Khan some clothes at last. He had wandered through the jungle in just a blanket long enough. Besides, the blanket would be useful for other things.

"Good." Khan agreed and settled in now, no longer hungry, having eaten a bowl and a half of soup, and snacked along with Jim. So he simply held his coffee cup and relaxed by the fire. Watching the flames crackle for a time, before allowing his gaze to lift to the night sky, now that it was truly visible, no longer obscured by the jungle canopy.

“You really do take everything calmly,” Jim observed, as he put away his remaining spare clothes. “I’d probably be out of my mind with nerves by now. The world is so different from anything you knew. Heck, even I must be ridiculously different from anybody you’d ever seen before.” He shook himself a little and began to fuss with getting the dishes cleaned and put away, before sitting down again by the fire with Khan. “More coffee?” he offered his friend.

It took a moment for Khan to realize what about coffee he was saying, he was offering him more. But he had enough for the evening and placed his hand over the top of the cup to show no more should go into it. "Done. No more. Thank you." And even though he said 'thank you' which he usually said after accepting something, he thought that maybe his actions would help explain that in this case, it is a 'no, thank you'.

“Guess the rest is all mine,” Jim said and poured himself the rest, adding his sugar, before setting aside the grounds and kettle. “We’ve got a long way to go. I wonder if you’ve seen an ocean before …” He turned to Khan and scooted closer. “I hope you’re willing to talk more. Khan, Jim?” he asked, gesturing between them.

"Khan. Jim?” Khan echoed back and looked to his guide. What did he want? Was he meant to do something? Was Jim asking questions, and Khan did not recognize them to answer? "Pencil?” He asked, thinking whatever needed to be said might be better understood if drawn out.

“Oh, good, you’re open to talking,” Jim said and went to grab his pencil and journal. He sat beside Khan this time and opened to the back, before handing the journal to Khan to use if he wanted. “Khan, Jim talk? Talk?” He gestured between them and then to his mouth. “Talk.”
"Khan. Talk. Jim." Khan said, indicating that he wanted to primarily learn his language. "Khan, talk. Jim, talk." He said, then pointed to Jim, and gave a nod, wanting him to go first.

“Right. Good. Thank you.” Jim considered for a moment and decided what he wanted to check first. “Khan good? Khan happy?” He was worried about how his companion really was dealing with everything. This new world and reality ... he couldn’t believe that Khan didn’t have any worries or fears about where he found himself now.

Deciding upon the context, that Jim was asking if he was feeling good, rather then a moral question of whether he was a good man, Khan nodded as he answered. "Khan good." He said, "Jim good?" Really, he didn't know what it was the Jim did, that brought him to his tomb, or why he wanted to get away from it, once he had. Which meant he didn't know what motivated Jim. What he wanted.

Jim worried about the situation with Khan, but didn’t know how to explain it yet, so he said, “Jim good. Jim likes Khan. Jim likes Khan good.” He smiled and said, “I wish I could believe you’re completely well, but until we can talk more, I guess we’ll have to wait to talk more about that.” He drew a picture of a boat, with sails, and pointed at it. “Boat?”

"Hm." Boat. Khan puzzled over this image for a moment then drew waves and a fish in the waves, before pointing back to the boat. "Boat?" Khan had traveled by boat a few times in his life, but it seemed like a strange thing to talk about right now, unless Jim was trying to tell him that was how he arrived? Or that is how they will be traveling soon?

"Yes! Ocean?" Jim asked and pointed to the waves. “Ocean. Khan, Jim boat ocean.” He used his hand to show a boat traveling across the oceans, before snickering at his ridiculous attempt at pantomime. But he still hoped for some sort of understanding from his companion. After all, he was an intelligent man, Khan.


"Good!" Khan smiled, pleased that this concept could be shared. "One." He started to count on his fingers. "Two. Three." He nodded, understanding these numbers. "Boat? Khan. Jim. One sunrise? Two sunrise? Three sunrise?” He asked, trying to get to the heart of his question.

Jim decided to go with the hopeful answer, thinking of good weather with fair winds, and said, “Well, uh-” He held up all ten fingers “-ten sunrise-” and than another ten fingers “ten sunrise -” and one last flash of his ten fingers “-and ten sunrise. Thirty sunrise .”

Khan laughed at Jim flashing his fingers at him and immediately put his hands over Jim's to fold his fingers down. "Jim." He said with amusement in his voice. "One." He said, holding a single finger, straight up. "Ten." He said, holding the same finger to the side, parallel to the ground. "Three." He held three fingers up. "Thirty." He said, holding the same three fingers to the side, showing Jim how to count large numbers on a single hand.

“Oh, that’s a good idea,” Jim said. “Thirty.” He held up three fingers on a hand tilted to the side. “Thirty sunrise. Thirty days. It’s a long ways, Khan, to my country. And a bit of a distance back to our base-camp, too. Mom and Chris know to be expecting me, but not exactly when. And
certainly not two of us.” He rubbed a hand through his hair. “Khan, Jim, horses, twelve days—” he held up one hand rotated to the wide and one with two fingers straight up “-boat thirty days.” He held three fingers to the side when he said thirty.

Absolutely delighted that Jim had been quick to learn this method of conveying numbers, he watched him use it in practice. "Horses. Twelve daze." He said, trying to mimic this new word that meant the full length of a day and not just the sunrise. "Boat. Thirty daze."

“Yes,” Jim enthused, glad that for once they were actually communicating clearly ... at least he thought they were. “Alright, let me see, what else can I tell you? I would try to explain the year, but I don’t know what kind of calendar your people had ... I wish I’d had more time to learn about you. That temple was far older than anything else I’d found ... but maybe the Hindu calendar was in use than? It is pretty ancient.” He lightly snagged the journal and put the symbols for the current month and day on the page. He turned it to Khan and pointed. “Yes?”

No. The symbols did not mean anything to Khan and he could not tell what they were meant to reference. Were they still talking about numbers? Days? Hours in a day? "Jim?” Khan shook his head no, indicating that he did not know what he was being shown.

“Oh well, it was worth a try,” Jim mused and set the journal between them. “I don’t know how to explain without a frame of reference. So, we’ll worry about that later. What else can I explain? Not a lot with the words we have ... so let’s learn a few more words. I think I’m pretty unique to you, so let’s see.” He reached up and tugged lightly at his hair. “Hair.” He carefully touched one of the locks on Khan’s head. “Hair.”

Since it appeared that Jim was giving up on whatever he had drawn on the paper, Khan watched the gesture that could be represented on both of them, even though there were differences in color and length. One thing was the same. They both had it. "Hair. Hair." He brushed his out with his fingers, using it like a comb. "Long hair."

Jim considered this gesture, but there were multiple potential things it could mean. Still, hair seemed fairly clear. “Hair. Long?” He shook his head about the second word, not completely certain he knew what it referred to, since there were multiple differences between their hair.

"Long hair." He said, petting his own hair out to the full length. "Short hair." He pointed to Jim's head. Then decided it probably was not clear. So he used both hands, and held them close together. "Short. Hair." Then spread his hands apart. "Long. Hair."

Jim grinned and nodded understanding, at least he thought understanding and snagged a piece of rope from his pack. He made a small piece. “Short. Short.” He made a long piece. “Long. Long.”

"Good!” They were on the same page. "Short. Long. Short. Long." Khan smiled at Jim for a moment, relaxed that they were still managing to learn things from each other. They were communicating.

“This is fun. Be more fun if we weren’t fleeing from trouble as fast as possible, but still ... your language is similar to some modern languages, but only in the broadest sense. Not enough to help me,” Jim said. “Let's keep going.” He pointed to Khan’s hair and said, “Black hair. Black hair.” He pointed also to the charred end of a stick. “Black.”

"Oh, colors?” Khan smiled. "Good." He nodded as Jim indicated to both his hair and then to the charcoal forming from the fire. "Black. Black." He then pointed to Jim's head. "Gold." Then to the necklace he wore. "Gold."
Oh, well, that could be a problem. English had so many different words for the same thing. Jim would have chosen blonde for his hair, but there was probably no such word in Khan’s vocabulary, if his hair color was new to Khan, as he suspected. “Gold. Gold.” He leaned closer to Khan and pointed to his hair. “Hair good?”

"Jim. Good hair. Gold. Khan likes.” Khan said and touched the top of his head with a grin, enjoying how it looked, especially by firelight.

Jim chuckled at the touch, enjoying even the brief contact. He was a handsy person and enjoyed his hedonistic pleasures more than a little. When he was out on his own, he missed them, so even a little touch was nice. “I bet you’ve never seen hair like mine before. Well, just wait ‘til you see it on a woman, Khan.” He gestured to his eyes. “Blue.” And than to Khan’s eyes. “Blue.”

"Blue.” He said, then tugged at the blue shirt Jim had supplied for him. "Blue. Blue." He did not know the color of his own eyes, he only knew the color of other eyes. Reflective surfaces were not as precise in his time, so if his eyes were blue, he had never seen them for himself to know.

Jim noted that Khan indicated his shirt instead of his eyes and wondered if Khan didn’t know his eye color. That idea fascinated him, and he grabbed his regular pack, digging through it to see if he had anything like a mirror inside. After a few moments, he came up with a small piece of reflective metal that he used to convey signals sometimes when he traveled with other people. His family had developed their own code. But now, he could use it for something very different. Carefully, he held out the piece to Khan.

Taking hold of the object Jim was offering, Khan held it for a moment, waiting for explanation. But when there wasn’t one immediately, he began to examine the object. It was a far better reflective surface then the knife Jim had given him. His face was not distorted and he could see himself in greater detail. So naturally he began to use it to examine his lips and nose and ears, all the things he would not normally see on himself.

Jim laughed again at how quickly Khan took to using the metal exactly as Jim had intended and examining himself. “Khan,” he said and gestured to the face in the metal. “Khan.” He lightly touched Khan’s cheek. “Blue.” He gestured to Khan’s eyes, so the man would check them out, too.

Following Jim's suggestion, Khan angled the metal and finally took note of his own eyes. Even in the dark of night with only the fire for light, he could see them. "Blue.” He said quietly, surprised by this. He blinked his eyes slowly and made his eyes track the metal back and forth so that he could see them at all angles. His eyes were blue.

Jim noted the wonder in Khan’s expression and said, “You really didn’t know. You didn’t know your eyes are blue.” He beamed at the older man and said, “They’re very good-looking, although they’re lighter than mine. You’re handsome all over, Khan, even if you’re a bit thin right now.”

Something, blue. Something, good. Something, Khan. The rest of the words were sounds that Khan did not know yet, but he looked at Jim and smiled at him. "Thank you." He said and handed back the object that Jim had given him to look at himself for the first time.

Jim took the metal piece and settled it on top of the journal. “You’re welcome, Khan,” he said. He held out his arm, right next to Khan’s. He pointed to his skin and then to Khan’s. “Khan? Jim?” He wondered if Khan thought there was difference between their skin tones.

Looking between their arms, Khan considered what Jim was referring to? Their arm as a whole? The skin? The color? "I was not always this pale. All those years sealed inside the tomb, in the dark, I do not look quite like myself." He said, talking aloud even though Jim could not understand him.
As much as Jim didn’t understand Khan’s words, either, he loved his voice, which was deeper and more honeyed than any he’d heard before. And he was certain that his diction in his native tongue was ridiculously precise, given how beautifully he pronounced each English word he learned.

“White. White?” he asked, pointing to each of the patches of skin. “Khan. Jim.”

"White." Khan agreed after thinking it over, their skin was the same now, Khan could not explain what he had been before, only the visible and the now. "Khan. Jim."

“Jim like Khan. Khan like Jim. Jim, Khan friends. Friends.” Jim gestured between them and smiled hopefully. “Friends good.” He wanted to forge a stronger relationship with the other man, especially since they would be together for a while, possibly a long time.

This took some thinking. "Jim like Khan. Khan like Jim.” When two people like each other, they are friends. “Friends? Friends,” Khan said and offered his hand, but his way of greeting was different, as he took hold of Jim’s forearm to join hands and arms that way to show a strong, solid bond.

Jim took a firm hold of Khan’s arm in a similar gesture and said, “Friends. Good.” He nodded to his new friend and squeezed Khan’s strong forearm. “Friends.” This felt like a giant leap forward for them both. He wished for some way to show Khan their enemies and explain the dangers. Once, he’d had a picture of Carol, but after she and her father betrayed them all, he’d burned it under a full moon and whispered a lot of ancient curses.

"Good." Khan agreed, then let go. "Jim. Khan. Sleep?” He prompted, feeling that the night was settling in on them properly, as if they indeed still had a long journey ahead of them, perhaps it was time to go to bed.

“You’re probably right,” Jim said. „Sleep.” He looked over at their sleeping arrangement, which was not as comfortable as the one he made from moss and leaves. Still, it would suit them both. And now, he could pad it a bit with the blanket. “Khan first.” He gestured the other man to the bed.

"Khan sleep." He agreed and moved into the shelter and bed that Jim had made for them. He settled down on his side and smiled at Jim as he used his arms for a pillow. "Thank you." Jim folded up the blanket in such a way that they could both use it as a pillow and carried it over to where Khan had laid down. “Here, use this, Khan. For your head.” He pointed at his head and made a gesture around the entire area. “Pillow.”

"Thank you." That would be a nice comfort. Khan accepted the folded up blanket and placed it under his head, shifting it around a little until he found a comfortable position.

“Goodnight, Khan,” Jim said. „Sleep well.” And then struck by a sudden impulse, the kind he seldom ignored, he leaned down and pressed a brief kiss to Khan’s forehead.

Khan blinked once, a little startled, but not angry. "Good Jim. Good sleep." He said and reached out to hold Jim’s forearm to hold, as they did when walking together.

Jim laid down next to Khan, since he was being held on to and made a sleepy noise, yawning once in relaxation. He smiled at his friend and said, “Night, Khan.” He closed his eyes and it only took a few moments for him to drift to sleep.
Chapter 4

Reining in his horse, Jim looked down from their perspective atop a small hill to the town some few miles ahead of them, the first they would encounter along their travels. And although in the last eight days of their travels, Khan had learned English at an astounding rate, they still could not really communicate complex ideas very well. Introducing additional humans into the mix would definitely make everything more complicated. But they needed to pick up some supplies for their last few days of travel, along with some better clothes for Khan, so there was nothing for it except to head into the village and hope for the best.

Jim pointed to the small village ahead of them and glanced at Khan. “Jim, Khan, town, shop, clothes, food.” He gestured between them and said, “Khan, Jim, close.” He wanted Khan to stay by his side and not draw any undue attention to himself. There was still no sign of any pursuers, and Jim wanted it to stay that way at least until they reached America.

The town below was a thrilling sight to Khan. People. Buildings. Animals. Colors. Though this was likely an average small town, to Khan it was a grand landscape. Stone and clay bricks were built into homes and buildings, all crammed together. Bright colors of paint were used to distinguish one building from another, as were large spools of fabric, tapestries, and blankets, providing shade and privacy to doorways and over the roof of street vendors. And Khan wanted to see it all.


“Yes, it’s a pretty village. Farmers. Herders. Shops.” Jim stroked his horse’s neck absently as he spoke. “Dangerous.” He took a deep breath and urged his mount down the hill, holding the lead of the pack horses. Their pace picked up a little at the bottom, as Jim urged them into a trot, and the horses, spotting what appeared to be barns, showed a willingness to speed. That made him chuckle a little, too.

As they entered town, Jim searched for a place to house their horses for the night, aware of the curious eyes on them. His ethnicity always attracted interest in these distant lands, but there was no hostility, just curiosity for such an unusual stranger. And Khan received matching stares, with his pale skin, blue eyes and natural elegance, couple with a still too thin frame.

Calling out to a friendly-looking young man, Jim requested directions to a place to spend the night and bed their horses. He tossed him a coin of thanks when the man directed them to a well-maintained pair of buildings, one a small tavern and inn, and the other a stable for the animals of their guests. “Stick close to me, Khan,” Jim said, pointing between them. He dismounted and tied up the three horses with him.

As promised, Khan had stayed close to Jim as they entered into the village. But he could not help looking at everything he saw, taking as much in as he could, even though Jim had suggested there was danger. Khan did not see it. He only saw people going about their lives. "Horses. Stay?” He asked as he dismounted Sunset to leave with the others. "Khan. Close. Jim."

“Yes, Khan close Jim,” Jim said in English and lightly gripped one of his forearms. He tugged his main pack closer on his back and headed for the inn, moving confidently. An older man greeted them, and Jim switched easily to the native language to request lodging for the night for himself, his companion and their horses. They haggled over prices for a few moments, before coming to agreement. Jim bowed politely to the man, paid half their fare for the night, and followed the man to their room, which contained two comfortable looking beds, a table with some chairs and as a
remarkable luxury, a bathing area, with a large tub and a fireplace for warming water to bathe with. “Perfect,” he breathed in English.

"Good!" Khan said, thrilled by the room that featured regional fabrics on the bed and as window coverings. It was also quite relaxing to be indoors, someplace where the air was cooler than riding under the direct sunlight every day. "Good, Jim." Khan beamed, excited that this was something they could have after being on the road.

“Yes, Khan, good,” Jim agreed and turned back to the innkeeper, asking to see the stables. He gestured for Khan to follow him, as they headed back outside and rounded up their mounts to go into the stables. These were also clean and neat, with good forage for the horses and fresh water. All four horses eagerly headed into stalls, even as Jim moved to start untacking them and grooming them for the night. It was the first time they could get proper attention in this way. He thanked their innkeeper again, who headed back for his inn. “Khan, horse,” he said with a point to Khan’s mount.

"Are you happy, Sunset? You get to rest and eat." Khan spoke to his horse, grooming him and taking care of tangled and dirty spots on his coat. "I am happy for you, my friend.” Khan said, still talking to him, giving him a massage around the ears. With the bit out of his mouth and the saddle set aside, Sunset gave a big sigh and shook out his mane as he settled in.

Jim chuckled and said, “Khan like Sunset.” He set aside some of the packs with their less valuable goods to remain in the stables, along with their saddles, bridles and packframes. “Khan, Coffee,” he said, indicating that he’d like for Khan to take care of one of their pack-horses, too. He was gently picking out Sunrise’s hooves as he spoke, removing rocks and dirt from the opening in her hooves. “Good girl,” he said quietly, as she patiently kept her foot in the air, even as her nose was buried deep in her trough.

"Yes. Khan likes Sunset." Khan smiled, and told the dark bay horse how handsome he was before leaving him to care for Coffee. He greeted the other horse, stroking and talking to him as he cleaned out his coat and checked his legs. He was fond of this horse too, even though he did not ride him. In fact, he cared about all four of the horses they had acquired, but Sunset was definitely his favorite.

Jim noted how much Khan seemed to love the horses and sighed internally at how much more difficult it would be to travel across the ocean bringing four horses with them. But it would be unkind and unfair to take from Khan one of the first connections he’d made in this bold new world. There was obvious rapport between man and animal, an ease that Jim envied, and he counted himself as a skilled horseman.

He finished his own untacking and grooming and slung the packs to go up their rooms on his back. His own pack and the delicate scrolls from the temple never left Jim’s side, as along with Khan, they were the only things he would never allow to get away from him. “Done, Khan?” he asked.

"Done. Good. Good horses. Eat. Sleep." He said his goodbyes to the animals and then took up his usual position at Jim's side. "Happy horses." Khan said with a smile, pleased by their accommodations.

“Happy horses,” Jim agreed. “Happy Khan, too.” He patted Khan’s shoulder and headed for the inn. “Shop. Bath. Eat. Sleep.” He had not introduced Khan to the first or second words yet, but planned to give him quite detailed descriptions, soon. When they met the innkeeper again, Jim requested that some water be brought up to their room and a fire made, so they could have a bath. The man bowed and called for his son, who soon bustled up to their rooms with water. Jim was setting down their bundles as the boy bustled in and gave him a quick look, deciding he could leave some of their valuables behind. “Khan, Jim, shop.”
Khan greeted the boy with a polite gesture, holding his hands together at the wrists, speaking in his own language. "Thank you for this gift of water." Though the words were likely not understood, the action was clearly polite and showing respectful thanks. "What is-" Khan said, as this being one of the more useful phrases he learned in the last week, "sha-p?"

The boy stared at Khan uncomprehendingly for a moment, and Jim pretended to translate for him, tossing the boy a coin and giving him thanks for his help. “Jim show.” He offered his arm to Khan, having coached him to take hold when Jim wanted to escort him somewhere. And here, it would be vitally important, as they walked into the town’s bazaar to shop. “Khan close ... please.” The last was another word he had managed to teach Khan through a great deal of trial and error.

"Khan close." Khan promised as he took Jim's arm, very satisfied and excited by the experience. He wanted to see everything. Meet people, listen to the language as it was exchanged naturally.

Jim led Khan out, knowing the water would take some time to warm properly for their baths, and headed for the bazaar, which they had seen during their ride into town. As they neared the area, the streets became more crowded and more colorful, as people hurried to and from the shops that soon began to line the streets. People manning each booth called out about their wares, waving especially at the prosperous looking strangers. “Khan clothes,” he said to his companion, gesturing to the shops.

Khan squeezed Jim's arm tightly in excitement, containing his urge to touch everything by holding onto Jim tighter. He smiled as people spoke to him, even though he did not understand the language. He understood the gestures: come closer, let me show you, look at this. Khan was particularly taken with clothing made with blue dyes, as it was a rare color to come by in his time. And to see entire tunics and scarves with the color was a delight. "Jim. Good-" Khan said, pointing to one outfit in particular, "Khan likes." he said, indicating to a long blue tunic with gold thread embroidery.

Jim gestured to the outfit and let the shopkeeper know that Khan wanted to try it on. She carefully lifted it down, explaining she had made it herself, and Jim held it out to Khan for a moment, before beginning to pull it over his head so they could see how it looked. “Yes?” he asked, once it was in place.

Though Khan did not yet have the muscle mass to fill out the outfit quite yet, it still looked quite good on him. "Yes. Good. Khan likes." He said and smiled at Jim. "Jim likes?" He asked, wanting to know what he thought.

Jim looked him over in the native garb of the country and nodded appreciatively, “Jim likes very much,” he said and turned to the shopkeeper to discuss price. They went back and forth for some minutes before arriving at a solution. He helped remove the garment from Khan and handed it back to the woman to fold. “Khan, more?” he asked, gesturing to her other clothing.

Khan once more held his hands up and wrists together as he bowed his head to the woman. "Thank you." He said, before looking through more of the items she had available. He then noted the scarf she wore to cover her hair, and similar scarves hanging on a line. Not knowing it was gender specific, Khan pointed to one of the deep blue scarves, "Khan?” He asked, hoping that Jim would allow him to have that too.

The woman hid her surprise, especially since Jim instantly engaged her in price discussions again, not wanting her to think too much about Khan’s request or upset his companion. In a few moments, he handed over a few coins in exchange for the clothes, very pleased with his haggling skills. He accepted the bundled tunic and scarf and thanked the woman, offering his arm to Khan again.

“Khan pants,” he said.
Khan smiled and thanked the woman again before taking Jim's arm. All the vendors interested him, tables with live plants, some with only root vegetables, others with nuts and dried fruit. There were brass and clay pots, for cooking or storing goods. Artwork. Handmade furniture. Blankets, tapestries, and yards of fabric for those who made their own clothing. A few times Khan stopped to look or ask Jim “What is-” but never asked for any of the goods. He was simply very curious about all of it. "Beautiful. Good." Khan would say as he looked at the sights and the people.

Jim did purchase with a mind toward their last few days of travel before they reached the port town. Once there, he would snag some foods for the ship, which would now also include enough forage for four horses. That was an expense he hadn’t counted on, but not one he couldn’t cover. His mom’s family had some money, which she gladly used for the family business, including covering Jim’s expenses.

Eventually, Jim nudged Khan and said more firmly, “Khan, pants,” wanting him to choose something to wear on his legs. His loaner pants were not near enough. Even the single tunic Khan had chosen was not enough. “Khan, shirt.”

"Yes." Khan said, indicating that he understood. Finally something familiar caught his eye and he pointed to a street vendor who had very basic linen pants with a loose waist which meant one size fit most. He pointed to a black and grey pair, and a simple tunic that was not as detailed as the first he had selected. These were predominantly earth tones, with no additional stitching or embroidery. "Khan like."

Jim nodded and launched into animated discussion with the vendor, who was a bit less friendly than the first. However, after a few heated moments, Jim came out with three pairs of the pants and two tunics, handing the man a few coins for them and looking content. "Jim wins," he said with a little shake and placed the new clothes into the growing bundle of wares. “Khan more?” he asked, thinking it was time to head back to their warm baths and room.

"Jim?" Khan asked with pleading eyes, wanting to ask for something, but not knowing how. There were more than a few stray animals in the streets. Some animals, like cows and chickens walked around at their own pace. While dogs and cats were skittish and careful to stay out of the way while they searched the ground for scraps. There were also stray children, and a few beggars tucked along the walls, sitting on blankets or trying to sell things like flowers and herbs, free to find in the countryside, but would make for a small profit if sold. "Jim? Food?" He asked, indicating to one of the beggars who sat on the ground, his palms presented like a bowl, and his head down, eyes averted so that he did not have to be seen. "One? Jim?" He asked, asking permission to help just one of these people.

“Oh, geez,” Jim murmured under his breath and looked over the row of beggars along the wall. “You’re a soft heart, too. Yes, Khan. Food. All.” He gestured to the whole row. “What?” He turned back to the various vendors selling food and nodded to Khan to choose what he wanted. “Khan.”

"Rice." He said, though did not know Jim's name for it, but pointed to a large cauldron of rice that a vendor was selling, one bowl at a time. "Honey." He said, which was sold in chunks and in liquid form by the man at the table next to the rice. "Please." He asked Jim, raising his hands to show the same beggar style gesture as those sitting on the ground.

“Rice and honey,” Jim said and nodded. “Alright. Come on.” He headed for the rice and honey dealers and launched into a very animated conversation, gesturing toward the rice bowls and honey enough for each and soon, there was a loud three-way debate going on. In a few moments, the first serving was handed to Jim, who handed it to Khan, followed by a second. “Go. Be careful.” He
pointed to the beggars, before resuming the debate as the vendors scooped more rice and served more honey.

With honey added to the bowl of rice, it was a simple, sweet, and filling poor man’s meal, but a feast to those who had not eaten in days. So Khan knelt before the first man he had wanted to feed and placed the bowl gently in his desperate hands. "A gift, my brother." Khan said, offering a small blessing as he touched a hand over his heart, then to the beggar. "A gift, my brother." Khan said, offering the second bowl to the next man, and gave the same blessing.

Jim kept an eye on Khan as he served the beggars, noting the touches above their hearts, and the way each of the beggars responded with deep thanks and positive emotion to his companion. Shaking his head a little, he made sure to have the next bowls ready for when Khan came back for them. “Khan good,” he said, as he handed him the next servings, aware of the vendors putting together even more.

"Good, Jim. Thank you." Khan said with a beautiful and loving smile for the other man. He took two more bowls of the honey rice and once more knelt before the next beggar. "A gift, my sister." He said, but in the case of a woman, touched her forehead, rather then her chest during his blessing. "A gift, my brother." Khan said to the next, who was hesitant to accept the gift, even though he had seen the others receive the same. Khan recognized the concern and held out his wrists, showing the man that they were nearly identical, skinny and frail looking. The same. And so in this case, he performed the blessing first, touching his chest, then the beggar. The same. Then offered the bowl of rice, which was now accepted, even as the man cried over it with joy.

“I am feeling like a horrible person right now,” Jim said softly, standing just behind Khan and holding two more bowls for the last of the beggars on the street. He removed a few small coins, enough for several meals, from his pack and handed them to Khan. “Here, Khan,” he said. “For him.” He headed himself to the other two beggars and though he did not have the gravitas of Khan, he could speak to them in their own language, wishing them better futures than the present was now. And he also gave them a few coins, as well, knowing he would go back and do the same for the first people Khan fed.

Khan had not expected this additional generosity from Jim. He watched how Jim gave the coins, and attempted to do the same. Showing the man the coin, he placed it on his blanket, the mimed a bowl to eat from. "Eat again, my brother. " He said, then attempted to explain to the woman as well the gift of the coin.

Jim handed out the last of the coins to the other beggars and headed for where Khan still knelt by the only woman. He watched Khan interact with her, smiling softly at how gentle his companion acted with the poor. It was further proof that Khan had been a leader in his day, one who noticed the plight of others. Honestly, it made Jim feel pretty low, and he seldom saw the less fortunate who sometimes crowded the streets. His head mostly looked to the past, but that left the present fuzzier than it should be sometimes. He waited for Khan to finish his good works, so they could continue on their own way.

Even though Jim had already given the last two food and coin, Khan still approached them to give them his traditional blessing, not wishing to leave them out, even though the words did not mean anything to them. But in the end he rose, smiled and then turned to join Jim. "Thank you . Good. Jim. Happy." He said and took his arm again.

Jim paced him as he spoke to the last two and smiled at his return, eyes warm. “I wish I knew what you told them all. Someday, I’m going to have the words to figure it out.” He turned them back toward the inn, carrying their new purchases and being a bit lighter of coin than anticipated. Still, he
could afford the generosity, and he shared the glow of a good deed, though it was mostly Khan’s
doing. “Khan good,” he said warmly. “A good man.”

Khan did not say much as they walked back to the inn, except to ask "What is-" at a few more
objects that caught his eye. The world was fascinating. Culture had evolved. Colors seemed brighter,
and there were varieties of sound he had never experienced before. "Good. Day." He said and gave
a squeeze of Jim's arm.

“It’s not done yet, Khan,” Jim said. “Bath. Eat. Sleep.” He leaned into Khan and said, “I’ll show
you what a bath is … in fact, I’ll help give you a bath. You’ve earned it.” He sped up, eager to get
to the inn and divest of all of their goods and take a bath. They were both a bit worse the wear for
the hard travel, though somehow, Khan managed to still be elegant and relatively untouched.

Once they were up in their shared room, Khan began to look through the purchases Jim had made
for him. Touching the fabrics again, Khan smiled and marveled at the gift. "Thank you, Jim." He
said, with a small bow of his head, then reached for him. "Jim. Good. Khan. Happy." He said,
placing his hands on Jim's forearms as he leaned in to kiss the side of his face. "Good. Jim. Thank
you."

Jim grinned a little at the kiss and said, “You’re welcome, Khan. And thank you. Now, let’s get you
a bath. I’ll show you how to make a perfect one.” With a last pat to Khan’s arm, he moved away
and headed for the hot water, pouring it into the tub, before pouring cold water on top and blending it
together to make the perfect temperature. He added some more water over the fire to warm and
signalled for Khan to come over and pointed. “Khan, bath. I’ll go get some soap. I’ll help you with
your back and hair, if you want.”

Seeing Jim pour the hot water into the basin, Khan now understood what “bath” meant. He smiled
and began to undress, letting his borrowed clothing drop to the floor. "Good!" He said, putting his
hand in the water. A bath. With hot water. Indoors. This was amazing. Khan stepped into the tub and
sat himself down with a pleased sigh, instantly settling in.

Jim chuckled at the way Khan instantly settled into the warm water and made himself comfortable.
He fetched the soap, including something special for his hair, and brought them over to the tub.
“So, Jim help Khan?” He held up the cleaners in front of his friend’s face to view and waved them
around. “Help?”

As Jim approached with the soap, Khan sat up in the tub. "Jim, help Khan?" He repeated back, not
entirely sure what was being suggested, or offered. "Water. Good." He said with a smile, feeling that
Jim would shortly fill in the blanks, he hoped, as to what he was trying to suggest.

“Oh hey, maybe you’ve never seen soap, huh? That’s pretty silly of me,” Jim said with a laugh at
himself. “Well, I guess I’ll have to show you.” He set the hair cleanser aside and dipped the soap in
the water, beginning to getting a lather up. “Khan, arm, please.” He held out his hands in offer to
the other man, wanting to clean some innocuous part of him to start.

"Arm." Khan announced as he offered his arm. He was proud to have learned body parts with Jim,
as some of them had been a bit confusing to start. But in the end he had figured out the difference
between naming an arm from a leg. Or a wrist from an ankle. He watched Jim, finding it curious that
sometimes, not always, but sometimes, Jim acted as if he were one of Khan's attendants from years
ago. Seeing to it that he is dressed and fed, washed and escorted.

Jim grinned at the way Khan presented his limb and lathered it up with soap from wrist to shoulder.
“Clean!” he declared and handed the soap to Khan. “Soap. Clean all Khan.” He swept his hand
from the floor to the top of Khan’s head to indicate his whole body. “Yes?”
"Clean all Khan." Khan said as he accepted the soap, giving it a sniff and smiled. It was quite pleasant. He scrubbed his opposite arm and shoulder, happily being rid of all the grit and stale smell that had lingered on his skin after so long. "Good." He said, then started to wash his feet, and up his legs.

“You learn fast,” Jim said with a sideways grin and a nod to the other man, moving to sort their goods while Khan cleaned himself in the tub. “Once you’re done with the washing, I’ll do your hair. I think you’ll like that, Khan. In fact, I’m pretty much certain.” He laid out one of the new pairs of pants and a shirt for Khan to eat and sleep in, along with the blue scarf, uncertain when Khan might want that piece. The rest he folded and put into their packs, leaving them on top for easy access in the morning. He meandered back to Khan’s side and reached for the soap again. “Jim soap, please.”

"Soap. Jim." Khan said with a smile, handing the bar of soap over without question. He was thrilled to have this bath and felt amazing for it. Clean. Fresh. Warm. Comfortable. "Good, bath. Khan happy."

“Jim help Khan,” Jim said, lathered his hands and began to rub them over Khan’s back in gentle sweeps to clean areas not easily reached by the other man. “Good?” he asked, making sure Khan didn’t mind his somewhat forward actions. He thought Khan might find being clean worth having Jim be a little handsy.

"Mmm-" Khan sat forward, pulling his knees up in the tub to lean against as Jim scrubbed his back. "Good." Khan said, relaxing under the touch. "Jim, good." He said, then rolled his shoulder a little as Jim hit a spot that needed to be scratched.

“What was that?” Jim asked and lightly poked at the spot that seemed to make Khan twitch. “Are you hurting there?” He lightly rubbed a thumb over the spot, checking out for any kind of sensitivity or injury. The other man seemed very tough, but Jim still did not understand very well how he worked.

"Gooooood-" Khan leaned into the touch, then lifted his hand to mime a bear claw or lion paw, showing a scratching motion. "Please. Good, Jim." He said, looking back at the man who had volunteered to clean his back, hoping he would also be willing to indulge this little need of satisfaction.

“Oh, itch!” Jim said and nodded in understanding, scratching now at the surface. He made sure to cover the entire area, testing where the sensitive spots were. Based on body language, he focused on one specific surface, hoping that was where Khan was itchiest.

"Mmm- gooood." Khan softly purred, then simply slumped forward against his legs and sighed happily. "Thank you." He said with a smile as the itch he could not reach had been scratched and satisfied.

“A big softy,” Jim said and used the extra exposure to reach down and keep soaping Khan’s back, all the way to just above the slight curve of his ass. “Let me rinse you off and get your hair wet.” He set aside the soap and fetched the bucket of hot water, mixing it into a bucket of cool water to get a warm combination. This he carried over to the tub and poured a little into the tub next to Khan, before angling the bucket closer and closer, until he poured most of the water over Khan, making his hair wet and washing away the residue of soap and dirt. “There we go!”

Khan laughed, simply trusting and allowing whatever it was Jim was up to. But as he sat there, with fresh water dumped over his head, he definitely resembled something like a wet cat that was caught in a rainstorm. His long hair clung to the side of his face and back, heavy and thick and certainly in need of attention.
“Excellent,” Jim said and carried more water over to the fire to add to the rest there to warm, stirring the large cauldron a moment. “Now, we do your hair. Sit still for me.” He snagged the glass bottle of special soap and said, “I got this from a friend of mine. She has the longest hair I’ve ever seen. Swears by this stuff for washing and keeping hair clean and fresh. We’ll see.” He poured some in his hands and began to massage it into Khan’s long strands.

"Good, Khan happy." Khan closed his eyes and melted under Jim's hands. He offered no resistance whatsoever as Jim massaged his scalp and began to start up a lather in his hair, washing it clean and strengthening the strands. It had been a long time since Khan had been treated as well as this, and he was not about to say no to the special care.

“You should be happy,” Jim said, “getting such personal service.” He grinned a little to himself. “Jim happy, too. I confess, Khan, I’m pretty much all about the personal service. I like being able to be close to people. And you’re pretty well built, for a man who was stuck in a temple for several thousand years. Khan good.”

"Khan good." Khan echoed back, indicating that he was well and content. He rolled his head to the side, then the other as Jim scrubbed and washed his hair. He hoped to have many more baths like this. It made his displacement from his time that much more bearable, with baths, and beds, and good food, and a friend looking after him.

“Time to rinse,” Jim said and fetched some more water, before pouring it carefully over Khan’s head, trusting him to know to close and cover his eyes. Soap poured from his hair, and after emptying the bucket, Jim helped clear the rest of it out, running his fingers through the long black strands and squeezing water off the ends. “Towel time.” He dried his own hands and lifted a large towel up into the air, moving to stand next to the tub. “Khan, dry.”

Khan watched as Jim went to fetch the towel and understood that bath time was done. As he stood from the water, he smiled at Jim, feeling refreshed and clean as soon as the air hit his skin. "Good. Happy." He said and stepped out of the tub and into the towel Jim held for him. "Thank you, Jim.”

“You’re welcome, Khan.” Jim said with a little tip of his head and wrapped the towel around him. “Jim bath now. Khan dress.” He did not mind reusing bathwater, as that was customary, especially since he was only the second person. He did bail a bucket or two out of the tub and add some fresh hot water to rewarm the rest. He than stripped casually out of all of his clothes and climbed into the tub. With a low hum, he allowed his entire body to just sink underwater, splashing the liquid to just below the rim.

"Jim, happy?" Khan asked as he sat on the edge of the bed, holding the towel around himself to sit and air dry a little. He watched Jim play about in the water with a little smile. "Water, good?” He prompted after a few minutes as he finally stood, dropping the towel and trading it for putting on the clothes Jim had purchased for him today.

Jim popped back up out of the water and shook his head a little, sending water everywhere. He grinned at Khan and said, “Jim very happy. Water warm. Water good.” He sank back against the side and scooped up the soap, vigorously lathering himself up from face to toes. “It feels so good to get rid of all of this dirt. I was getting tired of being covered in filth. I can finally shave properly, too.”

With the tunic on over his chest and the pants pulled up, Khan tied off the drawstring, then sat back on the edge of the bed again. The clothes were loose on him, but that was the style anyway, making the skin much more breathable on hot or humid days. "Jim ..." Khan searched his growing vocabulary for the right word. "Khan likes Jim. Jim-" He sighed, realizing he did not have the right word for it, so tried to express that he thought Jim was looking well in another way, "Nice hair. Nice
“Are you calling me attractive, Khan?” Jim asked with a cheeky grin at the other man. “Thank you, Khan. Khan good. Jim likes Khan.” He waved him over and held up the soap. “Khan soap Jim back?” He gestured to his back and held the soap out, looking hopefully at his companion. “Please.”

Khan smiled, listening as Jim expressed a similar emotion. Jim likes Khan. But he then tilted his head to the side, curious by the request for him to wash Jim’s back. Yes, it would be fair and equal to do the same, but Khan had never washed anyone else before. Others washed him. Not that it was beneath him, it simply was not something he had done before. So he got up off the edge of the bed and then moved to the side of the tub. “Wash, Jim?” He asked, taking the offered soap.

“Please,” Jim said and turned his back toward Khan. “Back. Can’t reach.” He demonstrated his lack of coverage by stretching his arms behind him and flailing a bit. “Khan wash Jim’s back please.” He looked over his right shoulder and sent a brilliant smile in Khan’s direction, eyes wide and lit with the desire for a helping hand. Of the cleaning kind.

"Yes." Khan said, understanding the direction and began to scrub the soap around in small circles over Jim’s skin. He started around the shoulders and worked his way down, methodically washing every inch of Jim’s back. Though as he reached the surface of the water and where the rest of Jim’s body was submerged, Khan paused to roll off his sleeves so that they would not get wet, before he continued.

Jim let out his own long, slow sigh and arched his back to bare as much as possible for Khan’s ministrations. “Thank you, Khan. That feels good. And it will get me a lot cleaner than I could get myself alone. Sometimes, having a partner is good for one’s well being.” He began to rinse off his front with the water in the tub, as Khan continued to apply soap to his back. “Food and bed sounds near heaven to me right now. Just got to take care of my hair and be done.”

"Good?" Khan asked as he felt he washed everything he could reach, or at least, everything he intended on washing. "Water, more?" He asked, offering to get Jim one final bucket of hot water for his head and hair, as Jim had done for Khan.

“Please. Water, Khan. Yes.” Jim gestured to both the hot and cold waters, hoping Khan had seen him mix them so he would be offered neither scalding, nor freezing, water. He was not sure how he’d explain otherwise. Their words were not there yet. And he didn’t want to startle the other man by yelling no at him to prevent being burned to a crisp by boiling water.

Taking the last bucket of water from the fire, and the last bucket of cold water from the floor, Khan walked over to the tub, then paused. He wasn’t sure if he should dump them into the tub, or right over Jim’s head. "What is-?" He asked, in place of having the vocabulary to say 'how to?' Then lifted both buckets to the edge of the tub, hoping Jim might direct him, or simply take over.

“Yipes!” Jim said and scrambled as far back as possible to the edge of the tub. He shook his head and said, “No, Khan. Mix.” He pointed at the empty bucket and said, “Mix. Cold. Hot. Please.” He wondered if the man would understand him and prepared to make a quick, if undignified, exit from the tub, if necessary.

Khan understood "no" and "please" so he stopped. Mix was not a word he knew, but worked out what Jim was saying by his gestures. Pouring half the bucket of hot water, and half the bucket of cold water into the third, empty bucket, Khan nodded to himself, feeling that this was the right action. "Good?" He asked, lifting this third bucket up instead for Jim to use.
“Yes, thank you,” Jim said with a pleased smile and scooted to the other side of the tub, reaching out for the bucket Khan now held. He tested the water with one hand and nodded to himself. “Good. Thank you.” Realigning himself in the middle, he gestured for Khan to pour the contents over his head. “Please, Khan, water Jim.” The idea of himself as a plant that Khan needed to water made him grin even more.

"Water. Jim." Khan repeated back and chuckled to himself, finding the idea equally amusing, since he did not have the words in English to express what was really happening. But he slowly poured the water over Jim's head and a little down his back and shoulders to rinse off the soap there, and to dampen his head so that he could wash.

“Oh, that’s lovely,” Jim said and grabbed the hair cleanser, which he spread on his hands. “Gold hair short,” he said and vigorously scrubbed the cleanser through the strands, unaware that they were spiking in little tufts all over the place in the wake. By the time he had the mixture spread to his satisfaction, he resembled a porcupine, or a hedgehog.

"Gold. Khan likes." Khan said, watching Jim wash his hair. He put the empty bucket down and mixed the last two portions of hot and cold water, so that Jim would have something to rinse his hair out with when he was done. But he trusted the man to do that on his own, without Khan's help, so he returned to sitting on the edge of his bed.

Jim flailed about before snagging the bucket and upended it over his head in a decidedly inelegant fashion, spluttering as water got in his face. “Bleh.” He scrubbed his hands over his features to get soap and water away, before disappearing into the depths again for a last cleanse. When he emerged, shaking his head like a wet dog, he blinked a few times owlishly and asked, “Khan towel please?” pointing at the object lying on the foot of his bed.

Though he did not know the name of it, Khan could guess that "towel" meant the cloth one used to dry off with. After all, Jim had provided it for Khan to use when he was done with the bath. And now it appeared that Jim was done too. "Yes." He said and got up to get the fresh towel from Jim's bed and unfolded it for the other man.

Jim hopped out of the tub, gloriously nude, and wrapped himself in the towel. “Thank you, Khan. Oh, that felt great. Best thing about being dirty … getting clean again. Also, shaving.” He dug out his shaving kit from his pack and set it up to work with. His beard had grown in a bit over the course of rescuing Khan and heading off for the coast, and Jim wanted clean skin again. “Watch this, Khan,” he said and proceeded to lather up his face with the special shaving soap, before running a straight razor over it, gold beard going with.

"Ah!" Khan rushed over to Jim, alarmed by this. "Knife!" He said, unsure why Jim would take a knife to his own throat.

Jim froze as Khan wildly approached him, obviously concerned. He carefully moved the razor from the edge of his skin and tilted his head to Khan could see he was undamaged. “Jim good. Jim shaving. Jim good.” He placed the razor on one of his cheeks and ran it smoothly down, taking suds and whiskers with him. “See? Jim good.”

Khan frowned deeply in concentration as he watched Jim shave the hair off his face. How did he do that without breaking the skin? How did he cut just the hair and not bleed? "Jim." Khan said, his voice a mix of concern and relief. He placed a hand over his own chest, and thumped it, beating fast, to show that what Jim had done to make his heart race.

Jim recognized that the gesture was one of concern and said, “Jim sorry. Jim good. Thank you, Khan.” He reached out with one hand, the other keep the razor away from them both, and patted
Khan’s shoulder. “I’ll just take a few more minutes, I promise.” He turned back to the task at hand and cleaned his face completely, checking in the piece of reflective metal he’d let Khan look at himself in before. And when he wiped off all the soap and turned back to Khan, it was like a different man was there.

Khan certainly did not know what to think of this. And without regard for personal space, began to press his hands to the sides of Jim's face, feeling the skin. It was smooth, and the skin was unbroken. And it changed how his face looked. "Jim?" Jim had transformed somehow, but was still the same man.

“Jim,” Jim confirmed with a little smile for Khan. He did not mind the way Khan touched him, knowing it was a product of his curiosity for how his friend had changed. He gestured to the razor and than to his face and said, “Shaving. No face hair.” This simple explanation made him pleased, since they had found many ways to communicate via simple words now.

"No face hair." Khan said, holding his hands to either side of Jim's face, pulled them away to see that there was no hair, then placed his hands over the same spot again. He did this a few times, as a sort of 'peek-a-boo' with testing the fact that Jim's hair was truly gone. "Jim ... happy?" He asked finally taking his hands away and leaving them to himself.

“Jim good. Khan like Jim face no hair?” Jim asked, hopeful that the other man would enjoy the look of his face without the whiskers. As long as he had the time, he preferred to keep his face clean of facial hair, although it did give him a more boyish look. His face stretched with his smile, which had barely stopped during their entire bathing and shaving adventure, especially as Khan patted his face. It made Jim happy, so that was important. "Khan like." Khan said after a moment to think over the difference and change. Jim looked much younger now, and it was only in this moment did he wonder how old he was. "What is- Jim ... years?" He asked with the best vocabulary currently available to him, to ask how old Jim was.

Jim held up two fingers to the side and then seven fingers straight up. “Twenty-seven,” he said. “I’m a baby compared to you.” He winked playfully at Khan and said, “I should get dressed now. It’s time to eat. Then we can get some sleep ... in a real bed.” He walked toward the packs to fetch some new clothes for himself.

Twenty-seven. Perhaps his young face was well suited and well earned to him after all. But why, at twenty-seven, was he out here alone? He did not have a family? A home? He had money to exchange for goods. Maybe that was where Jim was taking him to, his home. "Eat. Sleep." Khan agreed and sat on the edge of his bed once more, this time looking out the large window that let in fresh air and the song of birds in trees and on top of buildings where their nests were protected.

“Dress first,” Jim said, struggling into a pair of pants and a shirt. “Eat now.” He held out his hand to Khan. “We’re going downstairs and sit at a table and eat prepared food by an actual cook like cultured people. Hell, like normal people. Please come, Khan. Eat.”

"Yes?" Khan stood and took Jim's forearm to walk with him. They were going somewhere to eat. That was fine. That would be good. Even if Khan was uncertain how to expressed what he would want to eat, it was still a thrilling idea. "Eat."

“How are you so adorable?” Jim asked and pecked him playfully on the cheek. He led Khan downstairs to the main room of the inn, where there were a variety of tables and a bar with a few patrons. Jim selected the most private of the tables, signalling to the innkeeper for service. “Khan eat what?” he asked.
After being escorted to the table and sitting down, Khan looked around the dining area to the other patrons. Not because he was worried about them, but rather because he wanted to know what they ate. "Khan eat ..." He was unsure what some of the others were eating, or even drinking. "Jim eat?" He asked, wanting to know what he intended to have.

"Hmm, good question," Jim said and asked the innkeeper what the specialty of the house was. He learned it was a form of curry stew and asked for two of them, one without meat, since he knew Khan had some beliefs around meat and was unsure if he could convey clearly enough what was in the stew to him. He also got some local flatbread and fruit juice to drink, producing monies for their order instantly. Turning back to Khan he said, "Good food. Stew? Curry."

"Good food." Khan said, believing that whatever Jim ordered for them, it would be good. Not that he minded the campfire food they made together, but it was defiantly nice to sit down and be served a nice meal. "Stew, bowl." He said, making his hands into the shape of a bowl, indicating he knew what that was. "Curry." He said, needing to think back a moment, then touched his nose, followed by the tip of his tongue. Curry was strong on the nose and on the tongue, but he smiled, excited.

Jim nodded and said, "Curry. Good. Strong. Spicy." The last was a new word for Khan, but he repeated the gestures to tongue and nose in the same way Khan had. "Bowl," he also agreed, shaping his hands as Khan did and holding them closer to the other man. "Bowl." Reaching out with one leg, he lightly brushed a friendly foot against Khan's nearest leg. "Learn?" he asked, which was his way of requesting that they exchange more of their language.

"Spicy." Khan repeated back with a nod, understanding this. "Jim, learn -" Khan considered some words to teach. "Curry, curry." He began, giving the English word first, if he knew it, so that Jim might learn the equivalent in Khan's language. "Spice. Spice." Then considered and placed his hands on the table, patting it gently to indicate this was the next item he would describe. "Table."

"Curry. Spice. Table," Jim repeated carefully, making sure he got the pronunciations as close as possible. "Table. For eating on. Table." He stroked the wood surface in a gesture similar to Khan's. He gestured to the window in the wall beside them, a fairly new looking feature, made of rough glass, and said, "Window. For seeing out of. Window."

"Window." Khan repeated, then considered. There was not a word for the glass pane in his language, such things had not existed. But openings in walls had, so he pointed to the window, but then mimed only the edge, following the lines in a square, wanting to indicate just the opening. "Sky frame." He said, then added, "No Khan word, window." He said, saying there was no word for window, just the hole for looking outdoors.

"Oh, that makes sense," Jim said, about Khan's lack of a word for window. "I wonder what sky frame means then ... How about glass? Glass?" He touched the window surface and lightly knocked on the pane with a knuckle. He wished there were some other piece of glass he could use to point out something else, so Khan did not think he was speaking about the window again.

"Glass." Khan watched Jim carefully, since he had been given a new word, he figured out this was for a part, of the whole. Glass was the transparent part. "No Khan word, glass." He said, also not having this sort of thing in his time. They had some diamonds and crystals that were clear enough to look through, but not large like this.

"There's been a lot of changes since your time, huh?" Jim asked with a smile. "Glass is pretty useful. A lot of great things can be done with glass." He patted the glass again and moved his hands back to the table. They had gone through many common terms between them now, and Khan had quickly proven that he only needed to be told a word once to learn it and never forget. "So, this is a chair," he said, pointing at the seat he was on. "Chair."
"Chair." Khan said, "Chair." He then looked around the room, trying to get an idea of what else he could teach him. "There are four men in the room. Four. Men." He said, showing the count of four on his hand. "Plus, Jim and Khan. Six. Jim. Khan. Six."

"Plus …" Jim mused. "Plus.” He lightly tapped the table, trying to parse that out. "Plus?” He gestured to Khan and said, “Khan plus Jim two men?” He wondered if that was the correct interpretation of the word. He wished for a little more interpretation on the whole sentence Khan had said before. He’d only caught ‘four men in’ before being unsure. Four men in what?


Jim wished for his journal to write down numbers, but instead, he pointed to himself and Khan and said, “Two men plus -” he pointed at two other men at another table “ two men, four men.” He lifted up two fingers straight up and then two fingers of his other hand straight up and said, “Two finger plus two fingers, four fingers.”

Khan laughed, good-naturedly. "Two. Men." He said with one hand, indicating to himself and Jim. "Four men in the room." He said counting out four on his other hand. Then brought both hands together, "Six. Men."

“Six men minus two men, four men,” Jim said trying to follow Khan’s lead with math. “Six men minus Khan and Jim, four men.” He grinned hopefully at Khan testing how well they understood each other.

Keeping the count of six on his fingers, Khan followed along, this time in English, and this time, with subtraction. "Six men. Minus. Two men. Four men." He walked them both through, until he had only four fingers raised on the one hand. "Mi nus. Minus."

“Victory is ours!” Jim declared and caught one of Khan’s hands to squeeze softly. “Minus. Plus.” He beamed at his friend, pleased with how much they were learning together. He released his hand and sat back as their host brought out their drinks and some bread to start with. He thanked the man and pointed to the juice. “Fruit juice.”

Khan smiled, pleased by their success and also at how happy it made Jim. "Fruit juice." He said, then took a sip. It was sweet and tart all at once, but also refreshing. "Fruit juice."

“Good,” Jim said and smacked his lips with satisfaction, before finishing off his drink and pouring another. He noticed the innkeeper’s wife appear and talk to her husband and wondered if Khan knew the concept of marriage or something similar. He gestured to the pair as they shared a brief embrace and said, “Man, woman hug. Married.” That didn’t seem like a very good way of trying to explain, and he frowned, trying to find the words. “Man, woman, hug. Woman like man. Man like woman. Married?”

Khan turned his head to observe the two Jim was referring to. "Man. Woman." He got that part. "Man. Woman. Like. Hug. Good. Man. Woman. Sleep?” He asked by way of questioning whether they were a joined pair, if that was what Jim was getting at.

“Sleep?” Jim asked with a frown, wondering if Khan was asking about sex, but that seemed unlikely. Perhaps he meant that literally. “Yes, man woman sleep.” He picked up both of their glasses and set them next to each other. “Cup. Cup.” He pushed them to touch. “Together.” He set them away from each other. “Apart.” He pointed to the couple, who were still talking softly to each other. “Woman. Man. Together.”

“No. No married Jim. Khan married?” Jim hoped in a way that Khan had not left a wife and family behind, all those many years ago, but equally hoped that he had. Perhaps he had descendents in the present, though it was doubtful they would ever know even if he did.

“No married, Jim. No married, Khan.” Khan said gently and began to nibble on the bread that had been brought and drink more of his juice.

“Khan want married?” Jim asked, wondering if there had been someone in Khan’s life, so long ago. It was very possible that someone in a lofty position, as Khan seemed to have been (though Jim had yet to be able to figure out what position that was), was not allowed to get married, at least not to anyone he actually wanted.

Khan pondered this for a time. He did not know if he wanted to be married or not, this world and the people in it were still very new to him. He did not see that it was necessary for him to be married. "Khan, happy. No married." He said at last.

“Jim also happy no married,” Jim said with a grin. “Jim like women.” He peered around him and consider the other man for a moment, before trying something out. “Jim like men.”

Khan smiled for Jim, glad that he was also happy with his position in life, not needing to be married to be happy. "Khan like women. Khan like men." He said in agreement, completely unphased that this might be an issue. In his time, gender and sexuality were often fluid things that had more to do with spirituality and honoring the different gods, rather then some sort of taboo.

Interesting. And a bit caution inspiring, as this world was not very accepting of same sex relationships. Jim hoped that he’d have enough words to explain long before that became any kind of issue, but he’d keep an eye on Khan in case. “Good. Khan good. Khan handsome.” He pondered how to explain that word. “Khan face good. Khan eyes good. Khan body good. Khan handsome.”

Khan grinned and laughed. He had attempted to say something similar to Jim before. Now they had the right word for me. "Handsome. Handsome. Beautiful. Good face, Jim. Good eyes, Jim. Khan like. Good." They were in agreement, they were both good looking men.

“Jim handsome? Jim asked with a slightly cheeky grin, one part of his mouth curved upward in a way that showed he did not take himself too seriously. Not that he minded a bit if his companion found him easy to look at. He never minded being found attractive by either gender. And in others, he encouraged what went with mutual attraction, though he was always careful not to get women into trouble. Or expose other men or himself to the difficulties of being homosexual.

"Yes. Jim, handsome. Good.” Khan said again, not sure why Jim wasn’t taking him seriously. So he shook his head and let his eyes wander, observing the others in the inn, listening to their conversation and language, which was different from the language Jim spoke, but still not familiar enough to Khan to know what they were saying.

Jim lightly kicked Khan under the table and said, “Jim tease Khan.” He wished he had a better way to explain his behavior since it was so much a part of his nature. “Tease? Make fun?” He did not really think that the concept would translate to Khan, but hoped it might be a first step toward the idea.
"What is- tease." Khan asked, not having a frame of reference for this. It could mean almost anything. "Make fun?" Khan considered, "Jim, child?" Even though he knew Jim was twenty-seven, he understood this as Jim acting like a child. To be playful. Is that what he meant?

“Well, I’ve certainly been accused of it,” Jim said with a little smile. “No. No child. Jim make face.” He began to make silly faces, as ridiculous as possible. “Jim silly. Jim say Khan face silly, Jim tease Khan.” He was attempting to teach two words and concepts to Khan at once and felt completely uncertain that the method was conveying his meaning in a way that was understandable ... but at least Khan might enjoy Jim being ridiculous.

Khan's face was silly? That was not nice. Khan stared at Jim, perplexed. He had just said that he was handsome, that he looked nice. He did not understand this behaviour, and it had happened before when they were camping on the road. Why did he say one thing, then the opposite, later? It made Jim appear unreliable, and if make Khan concerned, since this was his guide and the man who had rescued him. "No." He said simply, wanting to put this to an end.

Jim sighed at the lack of understanding, but didn’t press the matter further. Apparently, Khan did not wish to pursue this line any further. He perked up when a younger woman approached them with their stew. He sat up and smiled at her brightly, launching into her language and both teasing her and flirting lightly. In a few seconds, he had her giggling and blushing a little at his words and antics. When she finally left, flushed and pleased with the whole interaction, Jim turned back to Khan and said, “Jim tease woman. Woman happy.” He than dug into his curry.

Flirting? That was what teasing was? It did not feel like flirting when Jim did it to Khan. No, he definitely did not understand. But he showed his thanks for the stew before beginning to eat, taking spoonfuls from around the edge, slowly working his way to the center where it was the hottest.

“Oh! No meat,” Jim said, pointing at Khan’s stew. “Vegetables.” He nodded once, hoping that Khan understood he was trying to do right by him. He continued to eat his own stew, noting that Khan had gone quiet again. But for now, he was content with the quiet, focusing on his food. Still, after a few moments, he asked, “Good?”

Khan paused in alarm, unsure if Jim was warning him or not. "No meat." He said, spooning his stew around, confirming that there was none there. "Food, good." Khan said, but looked to Jim, frustrated that he did not have the vocabulary to express how much the man confused him.

Jim caught his expression and offered him a warm smile, a bit of apology in his eyes. “You’re not the first person to ever look at me like that, either, Khan,” he said. “First one I remember was Sam. I must have been about four ... no idea what I’d just done, but the look on his face was exactly the same. I’ve seen it directed at me a lot since. James T. Kirk, you’re impossible.”

Khan smiled a little too, wanting to show good terms. But not knowing what Jim was talking about, he simply returned to eating his stew, using the bread to scoop up some parts, while using his spoon for the rest. It was nice to sit and eat. They did not have to rush, as there was plenty of light in the inn, and plenty of warmth. They could probably even have the fire going in their room, if they wanted. But Khan suspected, with the bed and proper blankets, it would be more then comfortable.

The girl returned with the rest of their flatbread, and Jim engaged her this time in requesting some form of dessert, preferably some of the rice pudding from the area. There was something of a relief in being understood so completely, in knowing all of the right words, so he lingered a little longer than he might of, before she scurried away to get them his request. He turned back to Khan and said, “Jim sad. Jim make Khan mad.”

Khan sighed heavily, sitting back in his chair as he regarded Jim. "Jim, speak. Khan, brain happy-
sad, brain add-subtract, brain hot-cold." Khan said by way of expressing opposites and extremes, and potentially, his confusion. "Khan, brain ... rope knot." He said, shaking his head with a frown, truly not having the words to say what he wanted, but doing the best he could.

“Khan confused,” Jim said. “Brain rope knot ... confused. Jim confuse Khan.” A little smile reappeared on his mouth. “Jim confuse hundred-" he held both hands with all fingers extended to the side “men, women. Khan no be mad Jim.”

"Confused. Brain rope knot. Confused." Khan said with some relief that he now had a word. "Jim confused Khan." But he once more listened as Jim then explained that Jim confused lots of people, not just Khan. "Khan, no mad. Khan, confused." He said, seeing a difference between the two.

Jim wanted to explain that once they had the words, he’d do a better job making himself clear, despite his track record, but he couldn’t get any of those concepts out right now. “Later,” he said. “Khan not confused later.” He reached out one hand to Khan. “Friend.”

Khan did not usually touch or hold hands. Arms, that was acceptable. But he had no intention of snubbing the offering. "Friends." He said and pressed his hand into Jim's, holding it lightly. "Friends, now. Friends, later."

“Friends always,” Jim said, encompassing much more than that, though he also repeated, “Friends now. Friends later. Thank you, Khan. Khan good. Jim happy.” He crinkled his eyes into a smile and squeezed the welcome hand.

"Jim good." Khan said, even though the man confused him sometimes, he was still good. "Khan happy. Good friends." Then he laughed and smiled a little. "Khan, hand. Eat." He said, needing his hand back so that he could continue to eat.

“Khan eat. Khan good,” Jim said and released his hand so that he could continue his meal. And with a contented smile on his own face, he returned to devouring his own, now feeling up to wiping out every last bit.

Pleased that they could still be friends, even though they did not always understand each other perfectly, Khan returned to eating his meal. He was still much slower at eating then Jim, who likely had been rushed through meals in his lifetime. But in the end, he finished the bowl of stew and the bread, feeling quite full and satisfied.
Chapter 5

The trading ships at the docks came in all sizes. And within their cargo holds, were goods from around the world, including working men from all around the world, speaking so many languages, Khan could not keep track of all the different variations. Animals were loaded and unloaded, as were food supplies for the crew, then came the true cargo, silk and spices to be traded abroad, dates and honey, brass and gold, and exotic animals to be gifted to other nations.

Some men had strange piercings on their face, and others had tattoos on their arms and chest and hands as they worked. Some had significant scars from battles at sea, and others were missing limbs from surviving a shipwreck during a storm. There were so many stories being told on the bodies of the men Khan saw at the docks, and each one fascinated him.

The ships themselves were unlike anything Khan had ever seen before. These were not small, two person fishing boats. These were not the trading ships of his day. These were houses, with sails, floating buildings meant to house crew and cargo for months on end. Including, for their protection, cannons.

The world was an amazing, changed place to Khan's eyes. And he delighted in the new experiences of sights and sounds and smells. Even if some of them were quite foul.

Tomorrow morning, Jim and Khan would be boarding one of these ships, to travel to Jim's homeland. But for now, Khan was enjoying what would be his last day on land for a while. As noisy and chaotic as it was.

For Jim, the experience of finding them safe passage on a ship to the Americas, one willing to carry their horses along with themselves, had been frustrating and nerve-wracking. He could feel the hours until the Marcuses caught up with them trickle through his fingers as he bartered with a variety of ship’s captains to get their trip back to his home set-up. And though on multiple occasions he about gave up and sold their horses, Khan’s fond greeting to his mount every morning changed his mind each time. The idea of separating Khan from the animal he obviously valued pained Jim too much to allow him to carry it through. So he kept on, until he finally booked them passage on the Higginson, a large packet ship with cabins for 20 well-to-do passengers, and a hold large enough to carry the horses and their feed. By the time he paid their fare, including food, his purse was considerably lighter, and he decided to sell a few of their items, like the saddles and pack-frames, to get some pocket money. When they reached America, he could look up his friend Dr. ‘Bones’ McCoy in New York to help him get new supplies.

So, on this day, he led Khan by the arm back to the bazaar, this time with the eye to sell. But he gave Khan a few coins to feed the beggars, thinking the man would want to do that again. This way the man would have something to do while Jim haggled, but he could still keep an eye on his companion.

Watching the pattern of how people bartered and haggled over goods, Khan was finally starting to understand it all. He smiled, when sometimes both merchant and patron stood their ground, only to soon also get the impression they were relations of some sort, cousins or uncles. It was all quite interesting. And then something caught his eye. A man at the market, going to each of the brass and gold merchants, trying to sell an item from his bag. An item that Khan recognized. "THAT IS MINE!" Khan said abruptly, in such a voice that the marketplace went silent for a second, shocked by a sound that rumbled like thunder in a canyon. "Jim- danger, mine!" Khan said and then ran towards the man, who immediately bolted.
Jim had sold both saddles, along with the packframes, and was haggling over a few more minor items with a last vendor when Khan let out a yell that shook the buildings around them. He promptly forgot all about his haggling, stuffing the items back into his pack, as he turned to locate Khan, pulling his gun smoothly out of his holster as he did. He got the barest glimpse of a native racing out of the bazaar area and Khan flying after him, before they both disappeared around a corner and out of view. “Fuck!” he yelled and sprinted after them, trying to catch up with the two men.

But Jim only needed to make it to the end of the street in order to catch up. Once Khan had turned the corner, he had pounced on the man in the street, hand immediately around his throat, while the other hand took away the bag he used to conceal the item he had been trying to sell. "This is mine! Where did you get this?! How dare you take what is mine!" Khan growled, his anger very clear, even if his words were not.

Jim nearly ran right into both men as he came around the corner and crashed to a screaming halt, nearly ending up face down in the dirt. “Khan! No! Let go!” he yelled, noting how his companion had a near death grip on the native. “What’s going on?” He kept his gun out uncertain as to what had provoked his friend, but put a hand over Khan’s, lightly tugging. “Khan mad why?”

"Mine! Bag! MINE!" Khan growled again, handing the bag over to Jim, who he trusted with the contents. "Where did you get this?! This is mine!" As thin as Khan's fingers and hands still were, they acted like talons, claws, capable of tearing flesh from bone with one blow.

The frightened man in Khan’s grasp wailed like a terrified child, and Jim glanced around at the attention they were getting. “Khan, stop,” he said. “Danger. Stop.” He opened the bag quickly and peered inside, gut instantly tightening into a knot at the sight of a beautiful, gold mask in the shape of a lion nestled in the old sack. An artifact that closely resembled those left behind in Khan’s temple. “Oh man.” He looked at the man still dangling in Khan’s hand and asked “Where did you get this?” in the native tongue.

“A big stone building far away,” the man whimpered, clutching frantically at the hand that held him by the neck. “Please. You may have it, just let me go.”

Khan eased his grip on the man with a slow, tempered breath. If Jim insisted, Khan would calm down, but his next breath could just as easily be another roar of anger. "Mine. Jim. Mine. Lion." Khan said, his eyes sharp and dark all at once as he slowly took his eyes off the man in his grasp, to look at Jim. "Mine."

“Yes, this is yours,” Jim agreed, looking at the mask inside the bag, before glancing back at the scared man in Khan’s grip. “Who were you with?”

The man shook his head with big eyes.

“Don’t lie to me or I’ll tell my friend not to be so nice,” Jim growled, noting how the man went paler than ever, eyes huge and frightened. “Who?”

“A man and a woman ... named Marcus,” the native said, practically shaking in Khan’s grip. “They led a large party of men to help them take things from the building.”

Though he did not understand the conversation the man and Jim were having, he did trust Jim to get to the heart of it. But one word was recognizable to Khan's ears. Marcus. The danger. The dangerous people Jim was worried about. This man had something to do with them. "Jim?” He asked his friend, wanting to be let in on what was going on.

Jim flashed a smile at Khan and said, “Khan good. Khan wait. Please.” He turned back to the other
“Where are they now?”

The man shook his head. “I left before them. They were angry because things were missing from the temple and sent some people to find who took them. They planned to stay and take as much as they could. I took the mask and ran. The others are some few days behind me.” He looked fearfully between them and said, “Please, let me go. You can keep the mask. I just want to go. Please!”

Jim considered a moment and then drew out some coins from his bag. “Go.” He looked at Khan. “Man good. Let go. Lion yours.”

Khan gave the man in his grip his attention and growled under his breath. He did not seem like a good man. So the growl was a final warning not to cross him again, before he did indeed let go. But it was settled, the mask that was his, was back in his possession. And just like that, Khan seemed mild and gentle and friendly again. “Jim? Talk? Marcus?”

The other man raced away like a swarm of hornets dogged his tail, though he kept tight hold of the money Jim gave him. He disappeared around a corner without a glance back in their direction.


“Danger,” Jim said quietly. “Marcus hurt Jim.” He took out his Bowie knife in a smooth motion and pretended to slice his arm. “Hurt.” He reversed it and mimed stabbing himself in the chest. “Woman Marcus knife Jim.” Putting the weapon away, he forced back the memory of that awful moment when Carol turned his own blade on him. “Marcus bad.” He pointed to the bag holding the mask and said, “Marcus take.”

Bad people. Khan only wished he had the advantage of knowing what they looked like. "Marcus bad. Mine. No take. Mine. Jim. Khan. Go.” He said, now feeling the drive to get away as Jim had, when they were on the road.

“Good. Thank you, Khan,” Jim said and kept up his double-march all the way to the stables, opening the doors and hustling them both inside. Releasing the other man’s arm, he said, “Khan two horses- Coffee, Sunset.” He gathered the small sack of remaining items for the horses, mainly their grooming kits, and slung it over his back before grabbing the halters for Sunrise and Sugar. They were taking the horses a little earlier than necessary, given the rest of the cargo that was still being loaded into the holds. But they could be circumspect on the ship, staying aboard until they departed.

The horses of course were happy to see Jim and Khan, and were unaware of any great trek ahead of them, or those in pursuit behind them. They lived in the moment, and that moment involved Khan and Jim. Khan greeted his friends and spoke to them in calm tones as he put on their leads to take them out of the stables. “We are going for a walk, my friends. Stretch your legs, while you can. Then we will get you settled on the boat. Get your sea legs.” He said, talking them through what would happen.

Jim understood a bit of what Khan was telling the horses and smiled at him warmly. “Go now,” he directed and led the horses out the stables and toward the harbor. He kept an even pace, not wanting to attract attention to them this time, but unable to go slow, either. The horses were alert, ears flicking in all directions, especially as the bustle grew near the docks. When they reached the ship, Jim waved up to the captain, who signalled that they could bring the animals aboard. “Khan first.”
"Come, my friends." Khan said, remaining calm with them, clicking his tongue and talking them through the experience. With Coffee in the lead, who was contrary to his name, quite a mellow horse, Khan led the two animals up the wooden rise the fed directly into the cargo hold of the ship. Their hooves echoed on the wood, and the ground moved under their feet as the boat slowly bobbed at the dock. But with Khan gently coaxing them forward, he led the two horses to the stalls that had been arranged for them.

Jim followed closely, but safely behind, having to coax Sunrise, who did not care much for the wooden planks, or the wobble of the boat in the surf. "Yeah, I know," he murmured, "it's a strange sensation. But you'll get used to it, girl." The pack horse, Sugar, followed as docilely as one might hope, not bothered by much of anything.

The gangplank into the hold was much the same, with Sunrise balking a bit, and Sugar just plodding down when the coast was clear. There was a nice set-up for them, with a bit of room to stretch, but secure stall-like facilities for rougher seas. Jim hoped they were blessed with clear weather.

Khan placed each horse in their stall for the time being, tying them off, but not leaving their sides. "There we go, handsome. Nice and cool down here, not too hot, not too cold." He said and began to use his fingers to gently scratch and brush in small circles over Sunset's shoulder, giving him some attention and reassurance. "Jim and I will be with you. And you will be here with your friends." Khan continued to explain, then turned to Coffee and began to brush out the mane from around his eyes.

Jim envied Khan's easy touch with the horses, his obvious affection for them, and them for him. He made sure his own pair were settled and put a bit of forage into their trough. "Khan please come," he said, wanting to hurry back over to fetch the rest of their things from the inn to move into their cabin on the ship. The sooner there were off the dry land completely, the easier he would feel.

As Jim called for him, Khan nodded. "Yes." He said, then gave his friends one last parting scratch of affection, promising to be back. It was a new place and he did not want the horses to feel anxious, but small things, the stall, the straw, the forage, the other horses, it was familiar and easy to accept. So believing that they would get their sea legs on their own, Khan went off with Jim again.

Jim reached out for Khan's arm again, wanting them to be linked physically to keep close in case of any danger. "Khan good?" he asked, weaving his way through the crowds. They had not discussed at all, as much as they could discuss, what had happened at the bazaar, the extreme reactions of them both to different things.

"Khan good." He said, completely at ease and accepting that they were getting their things together sooner, rather then later. For several minutes in the market, Khan had been a very strong, very angry man. But none of that existed now. He was calm and relaxed and listening to Jim, following his direction.

Jim squeezed Khan’s arm gently and said, "Jim glad." He kept a wary eye out everywhere for any signs of the man they’d seen before or either Marcus, unable not to be on edge now. They were unmolested back to their inn, and Jim hustled them up the stairs to collect their belongings. "Khan pack please."

"Yes." Khan said as he followed Jim's direction. He had enjoyed this room in the inn, the bed, the morning sun, the meals downstairs, the bath and fireplace. He knew that traveling on the boat would be different, but he hoped this wasn't the last time they would get to enjoy nice things. So he packed what little he had, and helped Jim clear the room of all their belongings. "Jim ... mad, Khan?" He asked after a bit, wanting to be certain that Jim was not upset with him.

“No, Khan. Jim not mad.” He paused in what he was doing and wandered over to lightly touch
Khan’s arm. “Khan mad other man. Khan ... rawr!” Jim imitated a ferocious beast bearing fake claws and showing his teeth, trying to look scary.

At this impression, Khan smiled and laughed gently, thinking nothing of it. "Yes ... Khan, mad, then. Khan happy, now. Mask, mine." He pointed to the bag that Jim had kept safe for him. "Khan-" He thought a moment, looking at his own hands. This wasn't like counting out numbers or sharing concepts like adding and subtracting. He did not know how to vocalize his anger from before. "Khan-" He tried again, but this time took Jim by the hand to place it against the side of his face. There he leaned into the touch, and was quiet for a moment before a soft purr began to rumble in his chest. Then with a smile, Khan removed the hand from his head, to guide Jim's hand to the side of his throat. There, Khan controlled the rumble of the purr into a low growl, showing Jim the difference.

Jim looked at him with wonder as first purr and then growl rumbled through his fingers. “You purr and growl,” he marveled. “Like a big cat.” He lightly stroked Khan’s throat, like he would any kitty. “And you move far faster than any person I’ve ever seen. The legend around you grows.” He moved the bag and offered it to Khan. “Mask. Mask. Khan mask. Yours.” He wanted Khan to know that the artifacts collected were still his.

"Khan mask." Khan agreed and took it out of the bag. He held it up to show Jim, the gold mask which took the shape of a lion's head, but on the inside, fitted to Khan's face perfectly. "Lion." He said, pointing to the mask. "Lion. Mask. Khan." Then he tried giving his full title, as he had when they first met. "The desert lion. Khan Noonien Singh."

“Lion?” Jim asked and made a roaring noise to imitate the large predator. “Lion?” He noted how perfectly the mask fit Khan and said, “Wow, so that really is your mask, and the man had taken it from your temple. I'm afraid the Marcuses will take everything for themselves by the end. I don’t know if we can get any of it back.” He felt terrible that so many things that may have been Khan’s personally were now in their hands. “If I had known you were there, I would have brought an army.” He moved closer to his companion and gave him a brief, but heartfelt, hug.

"Lion. Lion." Khan said with a nod, believing a lion was hard to mistake, so they were giving name to the animal correctly. Though as Jim moved close to hug him, he leaned into the embrace with ease, accepting the kind gesture. "Good, Jim." He said, the placed the mask back into the bag to take with them.

Jim knew Khan didn’t really understand the hug, but was glad he accepted the gesture with such quiet kindness. “Khan Jim friends. Jim like Khan. Khan good man.” He patted Khan’s right shoulder a couple of times and smiled at him a moment, before asking, “What is desert? ”

"Desert." Khan looked around the room, trying to think of anything that might be a useful visual. But there wasn't even sand from crumbling walls, as the room was well maintained. So he played the opposite game, first by giving example. "Hot. Cold. Wake. Sleep. Yes. No. Ocean. Desert. Jungle. Desert." He said, feeling that either were acceptable opposites that might get Jim to understand that the desert was an opposite environment.

Jim stared at him for a moment, trying to process those statements. “Ocean ... what? Jungle ... what? Opposite of those. Ocean ... lake? Jungle ... desert? I guess we’ll need to work on that one a little.” He nodded toward their packs and picked up a few for himself to carry, the last of their stuff not already stowed on the ship. “Go ship now, Khan.”

"Yes. Jim. Khan, go." Khan said, picking up his share of the bags to head out. There still seemed to be a question about what desert meant, so he continued to think it over on the walk back to the docks. Maybe there would be sand there, Khan could show him a handful to help it make sense. He
wished he could draw pictures Jim understood, as sometimes even his pictorial language needed translation as well, so that did not always help them communicate.

There would be time to keep learning language. In fact, Jim hoped they could pass some of the long voyage working on their communication in both speech and writing. The hours on the sea could get quite monotonous, and even reading would not pass all of the time. So, this gave Jim something to look forward to, as well.

He led Khan through the streets again, holding on to him more out of sense of worry than any real need. He figured the man could make his own way by now, as Khan was extremely intelligent and picked up everything quickly. But the worry remained, so Jim kept close and maintained hold, making sure they safely reached the ship together. And as they did, his muscles relaxed a little, some of the clenching in his guts easing.

Khan was quite comfortable holding arms with Jim. It felt comforting, even though Khan felt no threat of getting lost or hurt, he still enjoyed keeping the connection between them. "Good, Jim. Khan. Jim. Go." He said, indicating to the boat.

"Home," Jim said. "Go Jim home." He did not know how to convey that word to Khan yet, but he would when they got there, if not before. He trotted up the gangplank and headed straight for their quarters, wanting to set the rest of their belongings down and truly be ready to set sail. There would be some time before the ship had all her cargo aboard, and he considered if they wanted to venture ashore one last time to eat some land fare. He decided to try and ask Khan, turning to the other man. "Khan, eat ship? Eat land?"

Eat the ship? Eat the land? Khan took this phrase very literal, and therefore was confused by it. "Jim?" He asked with a tilt of his head. "No eat ship. No eat land. Bad. Jim?"

"Oh. Right," Jim said and chuckled, shaking his head at the confusion. He tried to think of another way of putting it and then said, "Eat here? Eat there?" He pointed at the ship for here and at the land for there.

Oh, that made sense. Eat on the ship, or eat on land. "Eat, there ... land, Jim, Khan, eat." He said with a nod, understanding now what Jim had been asking about. So he smiled, pleased that they worked it out. It would be nice to have a meal on land while they could. Thirty days, or more, at sea seemed to be a long time to Khan, eating the same foods over and over, with the same sights.

Jim nodded and checked that he had his knife, gun and enough money for food and maybe a few last goodies. He offered Khan his arm and said, "Eat on land. Go now." He considered their options and thought that a small, local stand carrying some of the country’s delicacies was the best option.

"Yes. Good." Khan agreed, hooking their arms together as they headed back to the streets of the port city. He did not know how to tell Jim, but he felt fortunate. That it had been Jim to find him, and not someone else. That it had been Jim who took him in, saw that he was safe, and fed, and rested. That it was Jim, who showed care for animal and human life. That it was Jim, who was kind and patient as they learned about each other. He knew that the boat trip might be straining at times, but Jim was a good man. "Jim. Friend. Good."

The way Khan spoke the words made Jim flush internally, a warm wave of emotion that he didn’t want to examine too closely. They had been in each other’s company alone for some weeks now, and Khan was amazingly attractive in both mind and body. So, it was really no shock that Jim found himself drawn to the other man, but he also knew it was unfair to Khan. He was newly brought into a world he knew next to nothing about. Jim was his only link between his old and new life, and it would be wrong to use that position to his advantage in a relationship like way. Maybe one day,
once Khan had acclimated to this time.

“Thank you, Khan. Khan good man. Jim like Khan much. Good friend. Stay close.” Jim brought them through the people bustling about the docks and ducked down a side street to a small stall selling local eats. “Eat here.” He pointed to the stall and looked to Khan for approval.

"Yes, good eat." Khan agreed to the choice and began to point out some of the foods that looked interesting to him, even though he did not know their names. He trusted Jim to make the appropriate selection. And so, even when Jim was not speaking to Khan in a language he knew, he would still listen and observe how the man communicated with others.

Jim ordered them a variety of small items, following Khan’s requests and his own desires, before directing Khan to a small table. He brought along a small carafe, full of a light, local, yogurt-based drink and two glasses, setting them down on the top, before he sat for himself. He did a quick check around them to make sure that there were no unfriendlies in the area, before focusing on Khan.

“Khan drink?”

"Drink. Khan. Yes." Khan said, sitting comfortably as he watched people go about their business. The world was so busy, so full. Some day he hoped to learn the history, of the events that unfolded from his time, that had brought people into the modern era. Learn new sciences. Understand all the religions. See how people had evolved. What were the first things to change, what was still the same.

Jim poured them each a glass and said, “Drink cold.” He shivered to show off what this new word meant. “Cold.” He lifted it up and took a long drink of the slightly sweet drink. “Mmm. Drink good. Khan drink.”

Khan smiled. He remembered cold. "Water. Bath. Hot. Cold. Jim ... aahhh!" He mimicked, quietly, the way Jim had yelled at him not to pour the hot and cold water into the tub without mixing it first. "Drink. Cold." He nodded in understanding before taking a sip.

Jim laughed at the memory and said, “Oh yeah, that’s right. You did almost burn me to a crisp.” He sipped more of the drink and looked a bit abashed at himself. “Well, I’m under a lot of stress, Khan. You can’t expect perfection.” He pointed at his face and said, “Shame.”

Khan was unsure of what Jim was trying to convey here. “Jim ... handsome?” He said, in case the word was similar. Or if not, that is what he should be saying, when point at himself.


Now Jim was back to not making any sense. Khan gave a short huff. "Khan, handsome. Jim, handsome. No ugly. Friends."

Jim laughed again and said, “Being ugly doesn’t make you bad, Khan. I’m just lucky that I’m good-looking. I know a lot of nice people who aren’t handsome, especially not the way you are.” But he bowed to Khan and said, “Thank you, Khan. Khan handsome. More handsome.” He hopped up as the stall owner called out that the food was ready. Snagging their plates, he hauled them back over to the table. “Here we go, Khan. Food.”

"Good. Food. Thank you, Jim.” Khan said with a smile, looking over the fresh meal before starting to pick at the things that looked the most interesting. Including some greens, and fried cheese, and something else that was crispy with vegetables inside. He wonder too, who came up with cooking foods like this, was it recent, or long ago, but still after his time? There was so much to know, even
for the simplest of things.

Jim pointed at the cheese and said, “Jim like best,” before popping a piece in his mouth. He sampled all of the food equally and with a great deal of zeal, having always enjoyed foods from all regions of the world where he had traveled. “Like best equal favorite. Jim favorite food. Khan, Jim favorite friend.”

"Favorite. Favorite ..." Khan repeated back, "What is- favorite?" He asked, understanding the part that said they were friends. But what kind of friends? The word equal he knew, but he was unsure if that was part of the same sentence or not. "Khan, Jim, equal friends?"

“Yes, Khan Jim equal friends. One plus one equals two. Like best, favorite same. Favorite equals like best. Yes?” Jim was trying to teach Khan new words in different ways, seeing if that clever mind would understand what he was trying to say.


Jim just barely refrained from ducking his head like a shy maiden accepting a compliment from her beau. Khan said things so freely and with such honesty that it struck Jim in ways few words ever could. He nodded once and said, “Khan and Jim are best friends. I haven’t had a best friend since Sam left. Bones and I just don’t get to spend enough time together, since he doesn’t like to travel. And Spock is well rooted now, what with marrying Nyota. Not that I blame him.” He reached out a hand. “Khan is best friend.”

"Good. Khan like Jim. Best friend." Khan noted the hand and this time was a little more understanding of this modern gesture of holding hands. So that is what he did. And he smiled, proud of himself. "Best friend, Jim." He said, trying out the combination of words, ensuring they still made sense. "Good. Eat, now."

Jim snorted and said, “Yes, your Khanness, eat now.” He poured them each some more of the beverage and dove back into trying a combination of their assorted foods. Encompassing them all with a wave of his hand, he asked, “Khan like which food best?”

"Khan, best food ..." He considered, then pointed to the fried dumplings with the white sauce, and then to the eggplant, and the garlic flatbread. "Khan, best food ... is good, is good, is good-" He said, unable to pick just one, but pointing to the ones he preferred at least.

“Well, you and I are together with the dumplings, but you lost me with the vegetable. Bleh.” Jim pointed to the first and said, “Dumplings. Dumplings. Yum.” He popped one in his mouth and chewed happily, loving how the light coating and insides practically melted on his tongue. He closed his eyes in enjoyment, thinking he might have to call this the best food.

Of all the words for Khan to stumble over, "Dumble ings." Was one of them. Maybe he wasn't hearing it correctly from Jim, or maybe his tongue did not know how to make the sound yet, but it was a strange word.

Jim chuckled through his mouthful, trying not to spurt food everywhere. “Dump-ling,” he sounded out, when he had swallowed. “Dump. Ling. Dumpling.” He waited to see how Khan would do with the the word, if he could get the ‘p’ sound, even though he rather enjoyed dumble ings.

"Dumbpt." That was manageable, almost. "Ling." Was easy and familiar. Khan made a few faces, working on the word, without making the sounds of it. Then after a while, he just blew air out between his lips and sighed. "Food." That is what it was. Food.
Jim couldn’t help it; he burst into a peal of laughter at the expression on Khan’s face, grumpy and dissatisfied with this new word. “Food,” he agreed through his laughter. “Food. Bad name, dumplings.” He lightly bumped a foot with Khan’s, in a show of solidarity. “Khan best,” he added, loving how easily the man made him happy.

In this case, Khan did laugh at himself. He understood that Jim was not making fun of him. "Jim, good." He said, feeling better about this exchange then a few others in the past that had left him frustrated. But he cleaned his pallet with the drink and sat back, enjoying the sunlight and the relaxed pace, compared to the running around from earlier.

Jim pointed to the second thing that Khan had indicated a liking for. “Eggplant. Bleh.” He skipped over that completely and tried the flatbread, nodding his acceptance of this food while he chewed. “Yum. Flatbread.” He was not sure Khan would even be in the mood to try new words, after failing at dumplings, but wanted to try. These were not words they’d have a chance at for a long time, after all.

"Flat. Bread." Khan said, finding this word much easier. But he was also more interested in eating the food then talking about it. "Jim, no words." He said, holding a finger to his lips, then said as an alternative, "Jim, eat."

“Spoil sport,” Jim said, pointing at Khan, but went back to his food. “You certainly do find it easy to order me around. Must be your nature because nobody else but my mother dares. I don’t much care for it. Especially when you’re saying things like shut your mouth and eat. Which is essentially what you’re doing.” He groaned, long and low. “My mother is going to love you. I am going to have to jump off a bridge."

With no idea what Jim was talking about now, Khan just focused on enjoying his meal without having to answer any more questions. They could figure out words and their meaning later. Khan preferred, or at least was accustomed to silence, whereas Jim appeared to have the need to fill that silence with talking.

Jim stuck out his tongue playfully at Khan and kept talking, “Someday soon, you’re going to know everything I’m saying, and this won’t—” He cut himself off, something grim replacing his happy expression, and one hand went to his gun. “Khan, ship,” he ordered, voice firm. “Khan ship now.”

And he was up, gripping Khan’s arm in one hand and tugging at him, already turned and moving in the direction of their vessel. He didn’t think they had been spotted. Honestly, he wasn’t even sure if the shadowy figure was one of Marcus’ men, but even in his quick glance, there had been something familiar, something sinister.

All teasing and annoyance aside, the moment Jim's face lost its playful expression, Khan was on guard. He listened to Jim and got up instantly to return to the ship, keeping close to Jim all the way back through the streets that returned them to the docks. He did not see the danger for himself, but trusted Jim, aware that the boat was the safe place for them, the horses, and their goods to be.

Jim kept a strict watch for any tails and relaxed a little when it appeared they’d left without a pursuer. “Jim sorry. Bad man near.” His mouth pinched downward, all traces of ease lost again. “I’m tired of having to run all the time. When we get home, I’m talking to mom and Chris about ending this.”

"Jim-" Khan said, reaching up to the touch the side of his face to get him to focus for a moment. "Jim, good. Sad. Angry. Run. Jim, good." He said, trying to express that whatever was going on in Jim's life, he was still a good man and that Khan cared for him. "Jim, Khan, go boat. Home."

“Jim home,” he agreed, thankful for Khan’s kindness. “And maybe Khan home, too.” Jim managed a smile for his companion, though his eyes remained tired and worried. He wanted them gone days
ago, well away from the reach of those who could hurt Khan. “Soon.” They reached the ship and trotted up the gangplank. “I’m going to talk to the captain to see what time we cast off.”

"Soon. Go." Khan said, and understood also that Jim was going to talk to those in charge, though he was not quite clear on everyone's titles yet. "Khan, horses. Stay." He said, indicating that he would be down below with the horses, keeping them company until things were decided.

“Good,” Jim said, thinking that Khan would be safer out of sight. And he could keep an eye out for any sign of trouble. He gave Khan a brief hand squeeze and parted ways from him for the moment, eager to spur the captain on to leaving as soon as possible.

Khan found his way down below once more, navigating the storage compartment to great the horses. "What do you think, my friends? Have you gotten used to the movement, yet?" He asked, going to Coffee first and began to calmly give him a rub down as he spoke to him. Then to Sunset, who he spent some extra time with to massage his ears to help him relax.

Jim stayed with the captain until the last cargo was loaded, watching the shore for any sign of trouble. His shoulders slumped with relief as the gangplank was pulled from the shore and the ship made ready to sail. He hurried down below to make sure the horses were safely ready for travel and to pull Khan back top to watch the shore recede. “Sail now,” he said as he reached his friend. “Horses good?”

"Horses, good." Khan said, and went with Jim agreeably up on deck. He watched as the sailors all went about their tasks, securing rigging and clearing lines. Khan did not know the name of the equipment used, but he was fascinated to watch it all.

Jim did his own check and approved of the way the horses were secured for the launch, before he headed up to the deck with Khan again. He stayed out of the way of the sailors and kept Khan with him, knowing how busy they got letting out the sails and catching the wind to take them out of the harbor. While Khan watched the sailors, Jim watched the land slowly get further and further from them, until he gently nudged Khan and pointed. “Say goodbye, Khan.”

And there it was, the docks, the city, the land as it can only be seen from the ocean. So much bigger than Khan had given it credit for. He waved slowly at the land. Somewhere, days and weeks away by land, was his home. Had been his home. And only now did it truly feel like he was leaving it. "Goodbye, my friends. Thank you, for your company. And your love." Without warning, Khan began to quietly cry, tears collecting around the edges of his eyes before spilling over as he was parted from the place that had once been his home.

“Shit,” Jim swore and unashamedly pulled Khan to him for a hug. “Don’t cry,” he murmured. “Please don’t cry. I don’t know what to do when people cry. Someday, we’ll come back here, and you can go see your temple again. Maybe we can find out if you have any relatives out here. I hate seeing people I like cry.” He stroked Khan’s hair and back with one hand and swore that if any of the sailors gave him a bit of grief about this, he’d black both their eyes and break their nose.

Just as Khan was direct and honest with his words, he was also honest with his emotions. He hung his head a little as Jim hugged him, letting a few more tears fall before he used his fingers to clear them away. Then turned his cloudy eyes back on the land mass that they were drifting away from. "My home. It's not mine any more." He said, coming to accept that truth.

Jim only recognized a few words of that, but understood the sentiment and the tone they were said in. He raised a hand and lightly directed Khan’s face to him. “Jim, Khan’s home. Until you find a new place you want to make your home. Home is with Jim. Jim’s home is Khan’s home. Yes?”
"Go, Jim home. Khan, stay. Jim home." Khan said, doing his best to answer, as he remained quite somber. He wiped his eyes once more, then said a few more prayers of good-bye.

Jim allowed him these moments in silence, not knowing how much Khan must feel the pain of leaving the only place he had known, but understanding enough about loss to keep his mouth sealed. He watched the land recede into the far distance, the wind already filling the sails and carrying them out at a good clip, and thought of the day Carol Marcus, the one person he’d ever really loved outside his family, had led him into a trap and abandoned him to die, stealing all of the artifacts he had worked with her to gather. That was the nearest pain he felt he had to Khan’s, and he wondered if one day he could share that story with the other man, so they might feel kinship over loss.

With a sigh, followed by a deep breath, Khan turned his eyes towards the ocean and the horizon of the unknown. He sniffed, catching the sea air in his lungs and eased somewhat. Holding onto the railing, Khan looked over the edge, watching the water break against the boat as it glided through the waters. "Go ... Khan, Jim ... go." He said, no longer looking back, only forward.

Jim moved to look at the ocean in front of them, as well. "Together," he said. "Jim plus Khan equals together. Friends." He pointed into the distance. "Jim home there. Khan see Jim home. Together." He leaned into the other man, comfortable in his presence and allowing himself now to enjoy the sea air and the feel of the sun on his skin.

"Jim, plus Khan, equal friends. Together." Khan said with another deep breath. "Blue ocean, go, Jim home." He did not know what was ahead of them, but he did know that Jim was his friend and they would remain together. So he carried no fears, only interest and curiosity.

Linking their hands together, Jim said, “Go home together,” and looked to the west.
Chapter 6

Days on a sea voyage were pretty much identical to each other with only the smallest differences to keep one from going mad from boredom. Jim awoke around eight bells and got himself and Khan breakfast. They took a couple of turns around the deck, before heading into the hold to tend to the horses, feeding them their oats, mucking out their area (tossing soiled straw overboard), putting down fresh straw, walking them around as much as possible and stretching out their legs (something Khan started doing that Jim admired and began copying immediately). After that, they both needed as good a wash as possible, using seawater, and had about an hour of lessons before a midday meal. Thereafter, they settled in for several hours of language lessons, if Khan had the patience for that long.

His companion looked better everyday. The healthy fare on a regular basis filled out his form from its near skeletal state and gave a shine to his hair and eyes. His confidence also increased, especially on the ship, where they saw the same people daily. For the time, Jim had kept them mostly separate from the other passengers, but figured Khan might be ready for them soon.

"Fish swim in the sea. Wind blows the sails." Khan practiced his complete sentences, which were mostly related to items on the boat, things that can be seen from the boat, or people, on the boat. But it allowed for Khan's vocabulary to get detailed in some areas, learning what he saw and overheard from others, and the lessons he spent with Jim. "Sun shines. Moon, glows."

“You’re going to be able to carry on full conversations soon,” Jim praised warmly and stretched up toward the sky, shaking his body out a little. A new journal lay between them on the table, filled with their scribbles and drawings, as they both illustrated words and questions for each other. “Wind blows. Rain falls.” He glanced up at the brilliant, cloudless sky above them and hoped fervently that they’re luck with the weather would continue. The wind had held steady, while the skies and seas remained clear, perfect for their trip. In a way, it made Jim worry, though, that their luck might run out in some other way. Pirates were still a possibility, as were unknown underwater hazards, but most of all, Jim feared that the Marcuses might have a faster ship on their tail.

"Rain falls, into river. Drink from river, water." Khan said. "We eat, breakfast. We eat, lunch. We eat, dinner." Khan tilted his head to the side, stretching his neck, rolled it forward, then tilted his head to the opposite side, stretching the muscle the other way.

Jim clapped his hands together in delight at the correct uses of words and said, “Break time! Khan and Jim run around the ship now.” He stood up and shook himself out a little, getting stiff from sitting for such a long time. “Khan ready to move?”

"Ready to run." Khan said with a deep breath as he stood. He was indeed learning a great deal while on board, but it also offered very little outlet. There was only so much learning words or watching the horizon Khan could take. He was feeling a bit trapped, and therefore was quite understanding of the horses when they were in a bad mood, which he constantly made an effort to soothe.

“After you,” Jim said with a sweeping gesture to the other man. He knew Khan would lap him multiple times on their sojourn around the ship, so there was no reason not to let him go first. Also, it allowed him to watch his companion as he first took off, admiring his lean grace and the power of muscles that didn’t look as strong as they were. He’d begun recording all of his official observations in his journal, noting that beyond having survived so long in the temple, Khan displayed strength, stamina and flexibility beyond that of normal humans.
"Yes, thank you." Khan said, then headed off in a light jog to ensure the path he wanted to take was clear and comfortable to him. Though by the second lap, he was running. Each stride matched well with the natural roll of the ship so that not one step was jarring to the body.

Jim started at a light trot, too, waving to the other passengers currently enjoying the run on deck. He did not push himself all that hard to begin, though he climbed up and down the steps and ladders between the various areas of the deck. The ship was currently not rolling much in the water, so he could increase his speed without fear of losing his balance and careening overboard or into one of the masts. He also kept out of the way of working sailors, who were not as busy during the mid-afternoon as at other times. And they knew to expect the two men’s exercise and avoided them just as neatly.

Khan paced Jim eight times before he slowed to run next to Jim for a bit. The sun was nice, but there was enough wind blowing to keep the sails full and the skin cool. "Ha!" Khan stopped abruptly and put a hand flat against Jim's chest to stop him. He then pointed out to sea, to where his eyes had caught something. "Whale ... whale breath!" He said, forgetting there was a difference between whale blow, and a human breath.

Khan nearly lost his breath running into Khan’s hand, and it took a moment to orient himself to what Khan was saying. But when he did, he rushed for the side to watch the magnificent creature swimming not far off their bow. “She’s beautiful,” he said. “A regular leviathan.” The whale flipped her tail out of the water and splashed it down in an arc. “I’m glad there are no whalers around here. Be a shame for her to get caught.”

"Good, whale. Hello!" Khan smiled, feeling that it was a good omen. She did not have to remain so close to the surface, or allow herself to be seen by the passing ship, but instead of diving down deep and out of sight, she blew air and sprayed seawater as she continued along the journey of her own.

Jim laughed and called, “Hello, whale!” as well, thinking being friendly couldn’t hurt. “You are a beauty!” He leaned against the wooden side and watched as her tail splashed up and down again, almost playful. “Do you have a word for whale, Khan?”

"Yes, whale is whale, also ocean mother, is whale. Two names." Khan said, imaging what it would be like to swim with her. To see the world as she sees it. How lonely it must be, as big as she was, the ocean was bigger.

“Whale. Ocean mother.” Jim repeated and said, “The second one sounds a bit more formal or poetic ... somehow. Your language is beautiful. I’m glad we’ll have a chance to preserve it through you. We’ll have to make sure we get your alphabet, too.” He turned to look at Khan and finally said what had been on his mind for weeks, “You’re looking amazing, too, Khan. Good food and fresh air has made you healthy again.”

"Yes, healthy now. In good health." He said, often testing the phrases when there was more than one way to say things. "No more bone-" Khan said and wrapped his fingers around his own wrist to show that the bones were no longer visible.

“No more bones. Muscle.” Jim reached out to lightly squeeze Khan’s arm, making an impressed noise. “And you are faster and stronger than me. I feel less than Khan.” He dropped his hand back to his side and looked out to sea. “It’s a lot of responsibility to make sure you are kept safe.”

"Khan and Jim are friends. Equal friends.” He said standing at Jim's side. "Khan and Jim are safe." Khan said, feeling quite secure in this fact. Even though he understood that there were dangers, he simply did not feel them the same way that Jim did.
Jim smiled at the other man and said, “From your lips to the ears of whatever Gods you believe in. And to whatever Gods grant good tidings.” He squeezed the boards on the side of the ship in a show of stress. “Thank you. Khan and Jim good friends. Equal.” He leaned out over the water a little to watch the whale disappear.

"Good bye, ocean mother!" Khan said with a smile, then turned to walk his laps around the boat, while he continued to enjoy the sun and fresh air. "Come, Jim. Walk with Khan." He said, not wanting Jim to be upset, even though the things that weighed on his mind could not be easily undone.

“Alright,” Jim said and fell into step with Khan. “You want to talk?” he asked the other man, lifting his head to drink in the fresh air again, letting it expand his lungs. “I listen to Khan. Khan my friend.”

"Jim, Khan friend. Good friend. Best friend." Khan considered what he wanted to talk about and how to ask the questions that were on his mind. "Jim tell Khan, talk to Gods. Jim not talk to Gods? Jim, scared of Gods? Jim ... mad at Gods?" He asked, unsure if this was some sort of taboo to address, but wanted to understand.

Jim chuckled and said, “Oh man, I still don’t think we have enough words for this. My relationship with God ... Gods ... is complicated. My family has never been religious, partly because we’ve study so many different religions during our time and all of them seemed as potentially right as any other. So, yeah, I’ve never really talked to God ... or Gods. But no, Jim not mad at Gods. Jim not scared of Gods. Jim ... confused by Gods.”

At first Khan was not sure he was following along with complete understanding. But as Jim reached his conclusion, it began to make sense. "Jim confused by Gods. Khan understand. Many people confused by Gods. Honest, Jim." Khan said with ease.

“Yeah, that’s true ... but not many people are willing to confess to it,” Jim said. “Most people believe in one God now, Khan. One God. Christian God. Came well after you. I’ve read the Bible, and it’s a pretty piece of writing ... some of it. Other parts, well ... I’ve read a lot of other religious texts, too. I don’t really believe in Gods, Khan. Not the way any of the texts are written.”

"One God? Hm." It was an interesting concept. And he was curious about the stories that were related to the Christian religion, but that hardly changed his own perspective on the Gods and life.

Jim laughed at his expression and said, “I know somebody who is one of the world’s experts on religion. You and she can talk someday soon. Your information on your religion will make her very happy.” He lightly bumped Khan’s arm. “Why Khan think Jim mad at Gods?”

Khan would not mind explaining the beliefs of his time or the Gods he knew to one of Jim's friends, but would want them to be treated with respect, rather than dismissed as Jim did with his God. "Jim tell Khan, to talk to Gods. Why not Jim, talk to Gods? Unless Jim mad with Gods."

“Oh. Well, two voices are better than one, right?” Jim asked. “Khan plus Jim equals more than Jim alone. And we might need all the blessing we can get.” He trotted up the stairs to the next level of the deck, where they made a wide turn around the helm, currently manned by one of the officers.

Khan did not understand this statement, but followed after his friend just the same. Still, something did occur to him, if Jim was willing. "Jim and Khan can make blessing, friends together, on good day." Not that today wasn’t a good day, it just wasn't the right day for a joint blessing. "Khan talk to Khan Gods, Jim meet Khan Gods."
“Really?” Jim asked, instantly interested in the concept, if also a little wary. There were some religions that had rather bloody ways of meeting Gods. And even though Khan did not strike him as practicing a sacrificial religion, it was always better to be safe than sorry. There were also some religions that were a bit ... earthy in how they spoke to Gods. He doubted the sailors would be pleased if he and Khan stripped naked and performed a dance or ceremony on the deck. “How Jim meet Khan Gods? How Khan talk to Khan Gods?”

Khan considered this question, searching his vocabulary for a way to explain it. He looked at Jim then laughed, throwing his hands up to show he had nothing. "Khan not have words, explain to Jim." But he smiled, relaxed even though he could not explain himself. "Khan show Jim, on good day." He said again.

Jim considered his response carefully, before pulling out a knife. “Blood to talk to Gods?” he asked and mimed cutting his arm. “Animal blood? Human blood?”

"Ah!” Khan quickly grabbed Jim's wrist to keep him from cutting. It was strange enough seeing him shave his face, but this was not right, not safe at all. "No, Jim, no. No blood. No blood."

“Understood,” Jim said, grinning at how quickly Khan took his arm to make sure he didn’t hurt himself. He carefully moved his arm to sheath the knife safely again, asking Khan to release him by the gentle pull. “Jim will not cut himself.”

"Good. No Jim, hurt. No Jim, blood. No Khan blood. No animal blood. No blood. No hurt. Gods, good. Gods can confuse ... Gods, still good." Khan said trying to express that even if they were confusing or primal to human eyes, they were still good and would not ask that others be harmed or killed in their name.

“That’s good to know, Khan,” Jim said, relieved that he had not asked Khan to show him anything that would require violence. “Gods speak through dance?” He demonstrated a bit of an ancient Native American dance he had learned, which was used to honor and request benevolence from their Gods. “Dance.”

Khan watched this, intrigued by the movements and what was being said through the motion of the body. He liked it. "Dance ... no Gods dance. Khan like, Jim dance." He said, mimicking a few of the hand gestures, but not moving around as Jim did.

Jim chuckled and said, “There are several cultures that tell stories through their dances or only certain parts of their dances.” He went into a dance that involved a great deal of revolving his hips, but also an intricate series of movements by his hands, where the story and prayers were really told, with each gesture important to the whole. “Hands talk to the Gods.”

Khan felt that more than Jim's hands were talking right now. His pelvis was talking too. But he did understand, it was meant as part of a whole. Either way, Khan liked it. "What Jim hands speak? What words, hands speak to Gods?” He asked, wanting to know what the gestures meant.

“This dance is a thank you for good weather that brings food and water to the people,” Jim said, “and a promise not to forget that the Gods provide the bounties of the earth and sea.” He showed the hand movements in slow motion, so that Khan could see gestures for rain, sun, fish and plants. “Are they not elegant movements?”

"Yes. Khan like. Good hands. Good, move body." Khan said, copying the ones for rain and sun as Jim demonstrated them. He also smiled at Jim, appreciating the fact that even though he did not believe in the Gods, he still knew how to talk to them, even for religions that were not his own. Khan felt that this was a good thing, to be willing to learn and respectful, even though he did not share the
beliefs.

“And it’s fun, too,” Jim said, allowing his hips to really get moving to a much faster beat, a fire
dance. “Some of the people can dance with fire. Now, that is truly honoring one’s ancestors and the
Gods.” He laughed and came to a still. “But no dancing? How about singing? Sing to Gods?”

"Talk stories." Khan said, doing his best to explain that people retold stories about the Gods as moral
guides, to learn from past mistakes, and show respect for life. Unfortunately, Khan did not have the
full range of the English language where he could currently tell Jim one of these stories.

Jim nodded and said, “I understand. Spoken stories. Written stories? Bible is written stories of
Christian religion. But can also speak them. Greeks had lots of stories of the Gods. Love Greek
religious stories. Their Gods powerful, but sometimes bad. Mean. Hurt their people. Hurt each
other. Good stories, though.”

Khan considered this, understanding Jim's meaning, even if some of the words were new to him.
he could explain more, that would require some writing, or drawing. "Gods, speak to animals. Gods,
speak to Khan. Khan, speak to people."

Both of Jim’s eyebrows tried to disappear off his head, as he said, “Gods speak to Khan? Khan
prophet? Prophet is person who speaks to Gods. Prophets are special. Khan is special.” He
stepped forward and lightly touched Khan’s right shoulder. “How Gods speak to Khan?”

Though the term Prophet was new to him, Khan did know he was special. But was uncertain if what
Jim was saying, meant the same thing as what he was. And his answer for how the Gods spoke to
him was not an easy one, so he was worried that Jim would not understand him, but he tried anyway.
"Khan see, eyes-" He said, reaching out to touch the side of Jim's face to hold their gaze, "Khan hear
Gods speak, tell Khan, what man needs. Khan, hear animal, Gods speak ... Jim, understand?"

“No. Sorry. No Gods have ever spoken to Jim,” Jim said with an apologetic shrug. “Or let him see.
But good Khan can talk and hear and see for Jim and for others ... right?” He smiled at the other
man, trying not to be freaked out by the idea of Khan being able to talk to Gods ... or thinking he
could talk to Gods. “Khan important. Khan let Jim write stories of Gods?”

"Yes. Khan. Lion of the Desert. Khan speak, Khan hear, Khan see for people, tell people what Gods
say." Khan said, seeing Jim's uncertainty and feeling that was because he was not explaining himself
well enough. "Jim write stories?"

“Khan tell Jim stories of Gods, and Jim write them down?” Jim asked hopefully. “To keep stories of
Khan Gods alive. Share them with all people?” He wouldn’t take things unasked, including the
tales of Khan’s beliefs, but wanted to share them if he could. “When words better.”

"Yes, good." Khan smiled at Jim. "When words, better. Jim write, Khan speak." It was something to
look forward to, knowing that the stories of his time would be told again, that others might know of
Khan and his people and their way of life before it got swallowed up by time.

Jim gave a little shimmy of victory and said, “Thank you, Khan!” He sped up on the deck and did
another dance, this one of pure joy and silliness. Stilling again, he pondered a moment and said, “So,
no blood. No sing. No dance. Stories on a good day? More?”

Tilting his head to the side, Khan watched Jim's curious behavior. He was clearly happy, though did
not realize his answer was that much to be excited about. Khan was excited of course, but it was his
language, his ceremony, his stories. "No blood. No sing. No dance." Khan agreed. "Stories on good
day, more ... on good day."

“More …” Jim said and rubbed his head in thought, thinking of other culture’s religious traditions. “Hmmm. I’m going to have to think about what that might mean. I am curious. You’re a fascinating man, Khan. I still can’t believe I found you. Sometimes, it’s almost overwhelming, Khan, to know I did. Khan, Lion of the Desert.”

"Khan, Lion of the Desert." Khan smiled brightly at this use of his title and patted Jim on his shoulder. "Good. We walk, Jim," he said, still wanting to make a few laps around the deck, to enjoy the air and sunlight while they could each day.

“Yes, walk,” Jim agreed and offered Khan his arm in a friendly fashion. “Together, walk. Jim and the Lion. That’s a good word for you … Lion. Lion. Roar!” He made the noise playfully, happily and with goofiness. For the moment, life was good and all things were bright.

Comfortable with this gesture, Khan linked arms with Jim, treating the action as quite normal. Though perhaps not what sailors were accustomed to. "Lion ... you like, Khan, Lion? Happy, Jim?" Khan allowed himself to leech onto some of Jim's delight and purred softly as they made their rounds together.

Jim’s grin broadened at the contented sound, a low rumble that seemed to emerge from Khan’s midsection. “Purr. Khan, the lion, purrs for Jim. Jim is happy. Happy with Khan as friend. And we’re more than halfway to my home. Khan meet Jim friends. Khan meet Jim family.” Jim sped up and brought Khan along with him, not that it was a strain on the older man.


“What makes a good day for more, Khan?” Jim asked, as they headed for the stern. “How know time to talk to Gods?” He carefully descended the stairs to the lowest deck, where the majority of the sailors were doing their work.

"Good day ..." Khan considered, "Red star, under moon." Which he could later come to find out was in fact the planet, Mars. "Wind speaks ... tell Khan, good, tell Khan, bad ... many, many ..." He said, trying to say that there were many ways to tell what time was good to communicate with the Gods, but that he could not currently relay them all to Jim.

“Red star under moon,” Jim murmured, trying to ponder that one out. “Well, we still need some more words to get the rest, but there’s a lot of time.” He looked up at the rigging and pointed. “Khan like climb?” He had secured permission from the captain to climb to the crow’s nest when the crew was not busy in the sails and the conditions were calm enough. Though he figured the captain never expected Khan or himself to be so avid about it.

"Climb?” Khan repeated back, as he shared Jim's line of sight, looking up at the rope ladder and metal spikes secured in wood so that workers might be able to do their job. "Yes, we go?"

“Khan first,” Jim said with a bow and a gesture for Khan to proceed him. “You’ll be much faster anyway. I know better than to think I could match your speed climbing. Just don’t fall.” He budged Khan to encourage him forward and up.

"Khan, climb.” He said and began to pull himself up, climbing the rope slowly at first, getting a feel for how wobbly it was while slack, then found the right rhythm to climb it without loosing step. As he reached the center mast that then led up to the crows nest, Khan paused to look down at the crew below, and Jim behind him. "Jim, good?”
Jim gave him a head start and began his climb, scaling up the rigging with the ease of practice. He’d made a lot of sea voyages, even worked some, so that he understood the give and sway of the ropes. Though nobody he’d seen made the climb as easily and elegantly as Khan. It really was a bit galling how well Khan did everything. “I’m good, Khan,” he said, dangling below Khan and pulling himself up to stand on the rope line strung along the sails.

"Good." Khan nodded and smiled at him. Feeling secure that Jim was right behind him and safe, Khan continued up the spikes that were in the mast that lead to the very top, a small platform for a man to sit and observe the horizon.

Jim climbed up behind him and promptly sat on the rail of the nest, legs dangling over the long drop below. “This is the view. Ocean everywhere. And nothing in sight but water on all sides. You can feel small and unimportant when you see this. Khan like ocean?”

"Ocean ... big." Khan agreed. He had never realized before, as endless as it appeared to his eyes, there was land out there, somewhere. Jim's home. They were going to it. Somehow, over the years, mankind had learned to navigate the ocean, and trusted that the land would be there.

Jim kicked his dangling legs like a happy child and said, “The sky is bigger. But yes, the ocean is amazing. Home is there. West. Due west. Because I know you don’t believe in southwest.” He grinned at his friend, knowing the other man had caught on to directions.

"West. South-West. Khan understands." That still had been quite a day, and the two had likely each been wearing down their patience with the other. But in the end, Khan understood the strange and new concept of going two directions at once.

Jim leaned over to lightly pet Khan’s hair a moment, a friendly touch that he hoped the other man didn’t mind. He admitted to a bit of a fixation for the long hair his companion wore, now soft and silky as his health returned to full blush. “Khan is smart. Smartest person Jim knows. Amazing.” he rocked himself back into position, completely unafraid of the drop.

Glancing out of the corner of his eye, Khan watched Jim as the man pet and combed his fingers through his hair. He enjoyed it a great deal. Especially after a windy day, when Jim helps to brush his hair out. But even with that, Khan did not treat Jim as a personal attendant. Even if Jim has washed him, dressed him, seen to his need for food or sleep. Khan knows that it is not Jim's role, but a kindness. "Jim, good. Amazing, good."

Jim straightened a little and pointed into the distance. “Khan,” he said, knowing his friend’s sight was much better than his own, “is that speck on the horizon another ship? There should be others traveling in these lanes.”

Khan turned his head to look in the direction Jim was indicating. "Ship, yes. Three-mast." Khan said, able to see that distinct of a detail to what other eyes would consider a blob on the horizon.

“That’s the first we’ve seen in days.” Jim said and leaned forward, as if that would let him see better. “There’s always a chance of pirates out here. But they’re probably just another merchant vessel. I wonder if the crew has spotted her yet.” He tilted sideway to look down at the deck, where the crew was always moving about. “Can’t tell.”

"Tell crew? Good, bad, ship?” Khan did not know what to think of the concept of pirates, even when Jim had explained it to him. He was happy to meet new people, but pirates could be dangerous to the crew, and to Jim. And right now, Khan was focused on going to Jim's home, to see where he was from, including meeting his friends and family.
Jim frowned a little and said, “Tell if they don’t see in a few moments. Not sure good or bad. Wait a little. Tell Jim if you see ... oh damn, these aren’t words I’ve taught you. See black flag.” He pointed to the flag, the British Jack, flying from their ships mast. “Flag. Black flag bad. Yes?”

Khan looked to the piece of cloth Jim was indicating to. A small colourful sail, that served no purpose. Except to be a flag, apparently. Perhaps it had something to do with being a war ship or a cargo ship? Or its intended destination? "Flag." Khan repeated back, "Black flag, bad. This flag ...?" He pointed to the one Jim showed him in comparison, was that a good or bad flag.

“Good flag. Flag indicate ... land of birth,” Jim said. “English flag. English ship.” He pointed to the flag and then the deck far below them. “Land of birth equals country. Jim country United States of America. Jim born there. Ship made in England. Ship English.” That was not quite true, but it was close enough to count.

"English." Khan was perplexed now. "Khan, Jim talk English. Flag, English. Boat, English. Jim, English?" He was uncertain if he was understanding this correctly, English could be a language and and country and a boat and the people?


Khan grumbled to himself and gave a firm sigh. Nope, there was no solving this one. Not now anyway. Maybe when they were back in their room with the notebook, but hearing it just sounded like a jumble of pieces that didn't fit together.

Jim laughed at the grumble and hopped into the crow’s nest to give Khan a hug. He always enjoyed the little rumbles that meant Khan was a bit out of sorts, as long as they were for minor complaints, like this. The noises reminded Jim of a grumpy dog, lightly growling at an annoying puppy without really being angry or wanting to do anything about it. They made Khan seem more personable to him, and triggered in Jim a desire to make Khan happy again. “Yeah, I know, language is messy.”

"Language, messy." Khan agreed fully. Then placed his hand on top of Jim's head, rubbing his hair. "Messy." He said with a little smile, knowing this was right. He enjoyed the hug and gave a light sigh, relaxing and then placed his hand against Jim's back as they stood together, overlooking the ocean.
They were only a week from landfall when their luck with the weather finally ran out. The crew had been on edge all day, looking to the skies uneasily and murmuring among themselves, battening down cargo and hatches and lashing down anything they could. Even to Jim’s untrained eyes, the yellows that tainted the blue sky, combined with the way the winds ceased to be blow into the sails, but whipped them about instead were signs of bad things to come. He took Khan down to the hold and made sure the horses were carefully stalled where they would have some protection in case of loose cargo.

The day seemed to stretch long, everyone aboard the ship holding their breath for nightfall, as the wind continued to pick up and the clouds built around them. There was no singing from the crew that day, and Jim found it hard to focus on his lesson with Khan or even their sojourn around the decks. He hustled Khan to their cabin early, as if the storm might blow through during their sleep and not disturb them at all.

The intense crash of a wave against the side of the ship woke Jim from an uneasy slumber, and he found himself jumping out of bed without really knowing why. The next roll of the ocean tossed him into the far wall, where he landed with a crash against their table, which had been lashed to the wall. He cried out in startlement and scrambled to try and find his footing against the pitch and roll of the deck below him. “Khan!” he yelled, wanting to know where his friend was.

"Here." Khan said, having been thrown from his bed at the first violent hit of water against the side of the boat. But by the second, he was standing on his own two bare feet as he grabbed Jim by the arm to help haul him up. "Jim, Jim ... Khan, here." He said, his voice firm as they could clearly hear crewmen yell and shout orders to one another. Those that had been asleep, no longer were. Those that had been on deck, well, hopefully were still on the boat and not in the water.

Jim grabbed for Khan’s arms and said, “Oh God, this storm is worse already than I feared. We’re in for a rough night, Khan.” His body lurched to the right, as the ship tilted out from under their feet. He tightened his hold on the other man as gravity pulled him to the wood floor with another crash. And even as they landed, the ship bucked and rolled again, sending them toppling into Khan’s bed. He was grateful that the beds were also lashed to the walls, preventing their rumbling about and making the situation so much worse. “The horses ... we should check on them.”

"Yes- horses ..." Khan said and once more helped pull Jim to his feet. "Khan, lead. Jim hands on Khan, no fall.” He said, wanting Jim to hang onto him for balance, rather then get thrown around on every turn of the boat, as bruises might very well turn into breaks, or worse. "Follow, Khan."

“Wait, our boots, we need to put on our boots, Khan. We can’t go out barefoot in this storm. And our macs,” Jim said, referring to the waxed cloth coats he’d bought them both prior to sailing. He fought his way to their trunks, fastened tight to the floor. With a little struggle he managed to get the lid off, just as the ship bucked, knocking him head first into the lid. He swore as the sharp edge gouged just above his right eye, splashing blood.

"JIM!" Khan went to him immediately, and helped him to sit on the floor where he wouldn’t be thrown around as much. "Jim! Jim, stay." Khan said, holding his head in place while he examined the responsiveness of his eyes and the depth of the cut. "Jim ... Jim ..."

“I’m alright, Khan,” Jim assured him, snagging a random piece of wardrobe out of his trunk and pressing it to the cut. “Damn. That hurt. It’ll take a moment to stop bleeding. Please- grab our macs to wear outside. I’ll be fine.” He lightly patted Khan with his free arm, trying to reassure him.
"Jim, Jim, stay." Khan said firmly, though he did grab Jim's boots and help them onto his bare feet, somehow rationalizing that at least his feet would be protected. "Jim, stay." He kept saying over and over, grabbing the blankets from his bed and wrapping them around Jim's body as a cushion against being pushed around into any of the many hard surfaces in their room. "Khan, go. Jim, stay. Khan, go."

Jim found himself wrapped up like a mummy in bedclothes and smiled at his friend, even as the ship bucked under them like an angry bronco. He shook his head, even though that made it ache a little more from the point of contact. “Khan, I can’t stay and let you go alone. Go together. I’m fine. I’ve hurt myself much worse before. Promise.” He wasn’t sure how to fight free of the confines, with Khan hovering so close to him.

Of course, Khan wasn’t going to hear it. Either pretending he did not understand Jim, or simply wasn't listening to him, Khan continued to repeat the same statement to his friend. "Jim, stay. Safe, stay. Jim." Then he placed a hand on Jim's chest, softly speaking a prayer to him. "Good." Khan said decisively and then got up, looking quickly around the room to make sure nothing was about to fall on Jim in his absence. "Khan, go." He said and began to pull on his boots, even though he was more comfortable without them. After which, he left their room and headed for the hold to check on the horses.

“Khan,” Jim said and began to struggle with the blankets, groaning when his head jarred at the motion. It got even worse when the ship rolled almost from side-to-side on a pair of violent waves, knocking Jim to his side despite his rather firm position on the floor. This didn't help his wound, and he kept himself pressed to the floor, makeshift bandage held tight against the wound to try and stop the flow of blood.

After a few moments of huddling and listening to the violent crash of waves and the moaning of the ship's boards, he peeled the cloth away, satisfied that the wound was closed for the moment. Tossing the bloodied shirt away, he threw the bedclothes on his own bed and dragged his mac out of his trunk, being more careful about the lid as the motions of the sea and storm kept him unsteady. But ultimately, he dragged on the protective garment and tore out after his friend, shutting the door tightly behind him. “Khan!”

Khan however never made it to the horses. There was an emergency on deck that was taking the attention of all hands. A line had been broken and half one of the main sails had come undone. It collected far too much wind, spinning the boat in circles, while it also collected far too much water, making the sails heavy, so that on each turn, the boat wanted to tip over on each wave. Eight men were in a row, struggling to pull the line so that the sails could be secured again, but it was heavy and they were exhausted from fighting the storm.

And here is where an event defied physical science, defied physics, defied nature. Khan reached up and pulled on one of the broken lines snapping in the wind. And instead of being thrown from the boat, like the tail end of a kite, Khan remained grounded, pulling the rope hand over hand until the fallen sail was raised.

“Jesus Christ!” Jim cursed, watching Khan haul in the line and raise the sail at the same time. The feat was impossible, but his friend still accomplished it, causing the sailors to cheer in relief as the sail came into control. They rushed to tie down the line, even as others began to climb the riggings to try and lower and properly secure the sails, now that they had control of them again. Jim began to head for his friend, when there was a scream from above, and a man came crashing down from the heights, body hitting the deck somewhere behind Jim with a sickening crunch. More cries followed from above, as the sailors in the riggings began to sway even more dangerously, the line the fallen man had been working on flapping wildly in the wind.
And Jim did not even hesitate, instinct propelling him toward the ropes and up into the sails, heading for the loose line.

"JIM, NO!" Khan roared, far louder then the crack of thunder from the storm. "JIM, STAY!" With the line secured by the other men, Khan was free to chase after him, almost instantly pinning Jim in place on the ropes as a spider might trap a fly in its web. "Jim, no ... no." He pleaded against the back of his head.

Jim oofed a burst of air as Khan suddenly appeared and halted his progress by smashing him against the ropes. He flailed a second, before securing his handholds and feet on the thin fabric that kept them from a plunge to the deck below. “Khan, they need help!” he said and pointed with one hand to where the sailors still fought the wind and rain and loose ropes that slapped in their faces, along with the sail. “They lost control of the line when the man fell. I need to get up there. I know how to make the knots they need. Please, Khan! I’ll be good!”

"Jim, not safe! Jim, hurt! No, Jim! Jim, stay!" He said, keeping Jim pinned where he was, "Khan, go ... Khan, Khan go ..." He said, then started to make the climb around him to join the other men to help them. If Jim had not hit his head, Khan would not have minded and in fact would have expected that they both make the climb to help. But Jim was injured and one more hit in the head could send him over, a risk Khan was not going to take.

Lifting his head, Jim watched as Khan practically flew up the ropes, his movements seemingly unaffected by the pitching boat and howling winds. He could never keep up with him, and Khan had pleaded with him to stay, now for a third time. Gritting his teeth, he held his place and hoped that Khan could catch the loose ties and one of the sailors could get to him to fasten them down correctly. If not, he would keep going up and help.

Khan snatched one of the loose ends out of the air, like a hawk picking off a smaller bird in its talons. He shouted at the other men, to ask them what to do, when one of them managed to pull himself close and tied the proper knot for Khan, then pointed to the other loose lashings that needed to be contained. So Khan moved across the slick wood and wet rope and snatched the next out of the air before bringing it tightly around to be tied off like the others.

Jim nodded a little as Khan managed the knots with help from one of the other men, and the sails came back under control. He made his way slowly down, clinging fiercely to the slick material and landing with a bit of a thump on the deck. There, he threw himself into helping the crew relash loose items and secure the sails as they finally were fully lowered. This instantly calmed some of the frantic tossing of the ship, but could not combat the waves that still carried their transport along like a helpless piece of flotsam. The storm showed no signs of abating, either, wind howling and rain pouring from the black skies.

When the men had done their work high up in the lines, Khan made his way down with the rest of them. This time, keeping pace so that if someone lost their grip or footing, they were never more than a quick reach away. It was a dangerous life for these men, Khan understood that now. Once more on the deck, one of the men went to look after the fallen and broken body of one of their own. Though the rest seemed to know there was no point to attending to the dead just now. Khan felt similar, as right now, Jim became his focus once again. "Jim, we go down ... go down, Khan and Jim ... down ..." He said, wanting them to go below.

“And check the horses,” Jim agreed on a long pull in of air, a bit breathless from the work in the storm. “Yes. Just let me.” He looked around to make sure there was nothing else pressing on deck, but though men still scrambled this way and that to collect loose items and minimize or repair damage, there was no longer the desperation to the movements. The worst of their tasks were
accomplished for the moment, and they were working to get ahead of the storm, instead of scrabbling to catch up. “Yes, we’ll go down.” He took one of Khan’s hands. “Khan lead.”

"Horses-" Khan said and kept a firm hold on Jim's hand. He guided them down below, using his arm as a buffer as the ship still rocked them hard or took a sudden drop on a large wave. As they reached the cargo hold with the horses, it was clear they were not happy about events. At least two of them were nickering at the top of their lungs, calling out for help, terrified and scared, and more than a little motion sick from the boat getting tossed around.

“Poor horses,” Jim said, heading for them as best he could on a floor that moved under his feet. “You’re alright,” he assured, even as he cast a wary eye out for loose cargo that could prove dangerous for them all. He made his way over to Sunrise and Sugar, reaching out to stroke their noses and try and calm them a little. “Yeah, I know, it’s scary out there.”

"Hello, my friends. Yes, we heard you. I know, you are scared." Khan said and patted Sunset on the shoulder, his skin trembling and twitching. He nickered again, even though Khan was standing right there. "Yes, you want to run. But there is no where you run. This is much safer, than anywhere else on the boat, I promise you." Khan said, slowly stroking his hands down his body, addressing each nervous twitch. "We are here, you see? We are here, safe together."

Jim smiled at the way Khan spoke to Sunset and continued his own gentle attentions to both Sunrise and Sugar, though he detoured over to Coffee now, as well. He exchanged gentle words and careful pets, knowing only the end of the storm would really calm them down.

A deafening crack echoed through the hold as the boat tilted nearly sideways, only ropes and luck keeping men and horses from careening into the wall now nearly beneath them. All of the horses screamed in fright, battling harder to free themselves and get away. For a moment, Jim thought they were all lost, the boat sure to capsize and then a countering wave sent them crashing into the water, bottom back in place.

"We are here with you, my friends. We will not leave you." Khan said, hugging an arm around Sunset's chest. He wanted to give all the horses his attention, but for now focused his touches on just the one, while his words were meant for all of them. "Be brave, my friends. The demons in the oceans fear the Lord of Horses. And you are all his descendants, they say. Have courage, my friends. Your hearts are stronger then the demons who would wish to pull you down into the depths."

“I wish I knew what you were saying,” Jim said. “It certainly sounds nice the way you say it.” He hugged Sunrise for a moment, before going to Sugar and offering the same. The ship continued to roll, but the waves felt a little less crazy in the moment, not tossing them with quite such force. “Let’s hope that was the last hurra of the big storm.” He carefully looked at the horses’ legs, glad they all appeared to be unharmed and out of kicking range still. But with things a little calmer, he looked over at Khan. “Khan strong. Stronger than man. Khan not man?”

"Khan, strong." Khan agreed with a little smile for Jim. He finally moved over to the next stall to give Coffee some attention. "Khan ... is, Khan. Lion of the Desert. Khan." Khan did not know how to explain his difference from other men. He knew he was different, but could not explain why. Scratching Coffee’s forehead, who was by all accounts, the calmest of them all, Khan continued to speak to the horses. "They say, only horses, know the true name of the Lord or Horses. It is a great secret, that each of you carry. Do you think of him, when you are scared? Does he give you courage?"

“Right,” Jim murmured, not sure what to make of that answer, but filing away the fact that Lion of the Desert seemed to mean even more than he originally thought, But for now, he turned to the
horses and continued his own attempts to soothe them, focusing on them as the storm slowly calmed around the ship. He noticed their fears slowly leaving them before he realized that the floor no longer tried to leave them behind. He leaned against the now calm Sunrise, suddenly aware of just how tired he was and how much his head ached. “We made it.”

The horses were exhausted, but well. And now that the boat was clearly in calmer waters, Khan carried a bucket of water for them to drink from, to soothe their nerves and throats from a long night of fearful cries. "My good friends, you are brave. Rest now, it is safe. We will come back to you, I promise. Rest, please, rest." He said, giving each a gentle scratch on the forehead before he came to Jim. "Yes, Jim. Now, Jim go, Khan, go. Room."

Jim was glad that Khan had the energy to take care of the horses, but managed to rouse himself enough to get them a bit of fresh forage, which he put in their shared trough. He propped himself against a bit of the cargo, which had amazingly all remained in place during the storm, a sign of how well the crew knew their business. “Can’t we just sleep here?” he asked softly. He looked at the straw on the floor, not even caring that it was dirty.

"No sleep, here. Horse step, Jim ... hurt." Khan said. After the horses were taken care of, Khan took Jim by the arm to support him. "Jim, tired? Jim pain? Jim, walk. Khan, walk. Go room. Bed."

“Yes, my head is pretty sore right now,” Jim said. “I didn’t even notice before. And I’m exhausted.” He cracked a yawn that made his jaw pop and leaned his head into the cargo boxes.

“Really, I’ll be fine sleeping here. Don’t have to move.” He closed his eyes, fully content to just sleep where he stood. His whole body felt battered and worn to the edge of collapse, so that passing out against a giant row of cargo boxes felt like a perfectly reasonable idea.

But Khan wasn't going to let that happen. Sleeping with the horses was perfectly reasonable in the grasslands, but not in their stall after a rough night at sea. Should they find reason to panic suddenly in the middle of the night, they could trample Jim with ease. And this was no place to keep Jim's injury clean and attended to. "Jim ..." Khan searched for the words for what he was about to do, "Khan, hug ... Jim, hug Khan." He said, thinking that was the right way.

Jim smiled at him and pushed off the boxes toward Khan, dragging himself a few steps to give Khan a hug. “We made it,” he repeated in a mixture of relief, tiredness and disbelief. “Thank you, Khan, for saving us by handling the sails.” He closed his eyes and pillowed his head on Khan’s shoulder “Jim sleep here.”

"Yes, Jim." Khan said, carefully hugging Jim back, moving his arms around the other man to support his weight. "Jim sleep." He said, then used his position to pick Jim up, so that he could carry him back to their room. Khan did not know anything about modern medicine, but he did know head injuries could be very bad, so he had every intention of seeing Jim safely to bed and cared for.

Jim made a little noise of protest at being picked up, but than just snuggled into Khan, too tired to struggle at all. “This is nice,” he murmured. “Thank you, Khan.” He blinked a few times following that and asked, “Wait, what are we doing?” He looked around them, sleepiness crashing on him so fast that he was acting a bit drunk.

"Bed, Jim. Sleep." Khan continued to carry Jim down the corridor, careful not to knock Jim into any of the woodwork. When they made it back to their room, Khan laid Jim out in his bed. He helped him take off his boots, then wrapped him in blankets. Though in his mind, that was not enough, so he invited himself to lay out next to Jim in the small bed. "Jim, sleep. Khan, stay."

Jim smiled at Khan and said, “Khan good friend,” in a voice that trailed off as he was pulled into slumber's waiting arms. But even as his eyes closed and breath evened out into something deep and
slow, he instinctively shuffled closer to Khan’s presence, knowing he was safe there.
Jim had come very close to kissing the ground when they finally got their feet, horses and baggage firmly on the streets of New York, New York, America. Even though those streets were filthy. But after the storm that had nearly wrecked havoc on their ship potentially sending them to the bottom of the deep, he was deeply grateful to be safely ashore.

They had been kindly given first priority by the captain for their efforts to save the ship and were helped off baggage and horses alike. The four legged creatures also seemed much delighted by their newfound freedom and the feel of land, even if they, as much as Jim, required a bit to get used to a steady floor under their feet. The trip to the inn had been accompanied by much neighing, prancing and tossing of heads, as the feel and scent of fresh air swept over them all. And all four plunged into the fresh graze with extra delight upon reaching their stables, eating as if they hadn’t been fed the whole time at sea.

"Jim. Look, here." Khan said, sitting on the carpet floor of their room. They had docked into New York very early that morning, and were now settled into the inn, just after breakfast. The city was still slowly waking up and going about its business, whereas Jim and Khan had been awake and active for several hours, getting their luggage and horses safely off.

But now they were settled, and Khan had his notebook in his lap, having thought up a way to help explain some things to Jim.

For himself, Jim was glad to just spend a day at the inn before setting forth to see Bones and start the journey to Iowa. Let the rest of New York bustle about them, for the one day, he needed a full rest to ready himself for another long journey. Their pursuers, should there be any, were hopefully far enough behind that this time spent still would not matter much.

So, he was comfortably situated in a chair by the window, sipping coffee and watching the streets stretching before them beginning to hum with the restless movement of a great city. He wondered if Khan had ever seen anything like it, but the other man’s request came before he could think of a way to ask.

“What is it?” he responded, lazily moving to look at whatever Khan wanted to show him.

"Jim, look. Here." Khan said and drew two large circles side by side in the notebooks. One he gave solar flares, and the other he split into a crescent. "Sun. Moon." He said, indicating to each in turn. "Sun. Woman. Lion. Moon. Man. Wolf." Khan said, then started to draw people below the sun and moon, "Man. Woman. Human." Then in the space between the sun and moon and the humans below, Khan drew his symbol. The one on his necklace, the one in his tomb. "Khan." He said, putting himself between the gods above, and the humans below.

“So, you’re not a God, but not a human, either,” Jim said. “A demi-god, maybe?” He pointed to the man and asked, “Jim? Jim less equal than Khan?” He pointed to Khan’s place above the man and woman figures.

Khan frowned a little, he did not know this term demi-god. Maybe that meant, someone who speaks to the Gods? "Jim, Khan, equal. Equal friends." He said, then placed his hand on Jim's chest as if that would show him. "Equal, heart. Same. Jim, Khan.”

He then returned to the drawing, wishing he could tell the stories that better explained these things. "Lion. Woman. Sun. Lion name, Nahkmet. Khan, Jim thank Nahkmet. Khan, Jim, Sunset, Sunrise,
Sugar, Coffee, all safe. We thank, Nahkmet.”

“Khan speak Gods. Jim no speak Gods. But Jim and Khan are same?” Jim asked, fascinated by that idea. In most religions, those who spoke to or directly served the Gods were generally considered to be more important than those who did not. The rest of Khan’s words were very interesting, too. “Nahkmet is Goddess? Lion Goddess?”

"Female, yes. Nahkmet. Lion. Sun. God-ess.” Khan said, "She ... protect, Khan, Jim safe. We thank, Nahkmet." Khan continued to press this point that they needed to thank her for their safe journey, to reconnect with the Gods. "Khan, Jim ... we, together, thank Nahkmet?” He asked now, wanting Jim to agree.

“Uh. How thank Nahkmet?” Jim asked, still rather cautious about performing religious ceremonies without knowing what he was getting into. There had been incidences, and he didn’t want to repeat any of them. “Jim glad safe. Jim glad Khan safe. Jim glad horses safe.”

"Yes, all safe." Khan said and left the notebook on the floor with Jim while he quickly got up. Going to one of the bags, he picked through his clothing until he found the gold lion mask. He then brought it over, holding it in his hand as if it were a puppet to speak to. "Nahkmet." He said lifting the mask up, then placed his free hand on his own chest, "Khan." Then he placed the mask over his own face. "Nahkmet-Khan."

“Right,” Jim said and bowed a little to acknowledge this transformation. “Nahkmet-Khan? Do I call you that now?” He did not move from his place, unsure what to expect or what might be the wrong move in this moment. Even the bow had been a bit risky.

But Khan removed the mask and smiled at Jim, showing no sign of offence or worry. The Gods he knew were not cruel. Dangerous and powerful sometimes, but never cruel. "Khan." He said, patting his own chest again, then kissed the mask, as if he were kissing the lion on her cheek. He then held the mask forward, wanting Jim to do the same. "Good, Nahkmet. Thank, God-ess."

Jim leaned forward and pressed a kiss to the cheek of the mask and said, “Thank you, Nahkmet, for bringing us over the seas safely.” He looked to Khan for confirmation of having gotten the actions correct. “Jim thank right?”

Khan smiled at Jim, "Good. Now, Jim, Khan, together, thank." Khan said and placed the mask back on his face. He returned to his baggage and standing there, began to take off his tunic, then pants, stripping down until he was nothing more then skin. He turned to Jim, now only wearing the mask and a healthy erection. "Jim, man. Jim, come.” He said, trying to translate his usual ceremonial words into English.

“Aw, shit,” Jim said and turned his back as soon as Khan began to remove all of his clothing. Nudity and sex. Those were the elements of some religions that Jim couldn’t really ask Khan about, since he didn’t have the words. Why couldn’t they just exchange a few chaste kisses to the mask, tell a few stories and be good with the Goddess? And hearing Khan demand that he come brought a slightly hysterical giggle to Jim’s mouth. But he managed to keep it down and shook his head firmly. “No, Khan. Bad. Jim stay here. Khan dress.”

Bad? Khan kept still, then pulled off his mask, revealing worry and concern. "Khan, not bad. Khan, Jim, thank Gods. Safe." But he did not know what to think. Perhaps he should have said things in his own language, to keep to tradition.

“Oh man, how do I explain?” Jim muttered, still resolutely turned away and staring at the wall. He decided to apologize first, hearing a note of upset in Khan’s voice and knowing he did not have the

Again, Khan did not know what to make of this. Khan had come across a few priests or priestesses who were shy, nervous, or even scared, but they had still been willing, and Khan had been good to them. That was the point, after all. "Khan, not hurt Jim. Nahkmet, not hurt Jim.” Khan put the mask down on the bed, then began to put his clothes back on slowly, truly perplexed.

Jim heard the rustle of clothes and chanced a glance over his shoulder, relieved to find Khan covered in his most intimate place. He slowly turned toward the other man and offered a small smile. “Khan not hurt Jim. Jim know.” He gestured between them and asked, “What word for what Khan do to thank Nahkmet?”

"Word-“ Khan stroked his fingers over the front of the mask, as if petting the lion down the front of her nose. "Union blessing, so that we might know the Gods and their love. Union blessing, to connect man to Gods ."

Jim caught a lot of the words and tried out, “Union blessing. Union blessing. Sex. Sex. Man and woman together make baby. Man and man and woman and woman ... secret now. Sex now for ... uh, man and woman very very close. More than friend. Not for religion.” He didn’t think he was doing a good job of explaining this, finding that explaining the mores of the time without most of the right words was very difficult.

No, Khan did not understand any of this. He did not understand what Jim was trying to tell him about modern sex. And he did not understand why Jim did not want to give thanks, when they were both safe. And though Jim did not know the details of his religion, he seemed willing, for a few moments.

Khan hung his head and lifted the mask, kissing the lion on the cheek before putting it down again. "Thank you, Nahkmet. You have seen us to safety. You have my love, and I shall praise you in private, from now on."

“Khan?” Jim asked, taking a step forward and reaching out for him. “Nahkmet important to Khan. Union blessing mean a lot to Khan? Jim hurt Khan?” He hated the thought of having insulted or upset his friend by refusing to take part in his ceremony. But although Jim had a lot of sex purely for pleasure, he seldom mixed it with friendship anymore. Not since Carol. Sex was for fun, not emotion. And he cared for Khan.


Khan considered these words. How could Jim have a union blessing with Carol Marcus? He didn't even know what a union blessing was. Then it occurred to him. Sex. "Sex ?" He suggested his own word. "No, union blessing. New word, sex. Sex, any one. Sex, good. Sex, bad." Sex could be all sorts of things, good and bad. "Union blessing, love. Always, love. Sex, yes love. Sex, no love. Sex, love maybe. Union blessing, always good, always love."
“Oh! Yes ... sex. Sex. Not union blessing, sex. Sex. No union blessing word in English. Not
done.” Jim shook his head from side to side to show he had no words to match. “Other way thank
Goddess good.”

Yes, Khan’s Goddess was good. Khan smiled instantly at hearing Jim feel this way. "Jim, stay? Sit.
Khan, see. Khan, speak. Jim, stay?"

Jim wasn’t sure this wouldn’t also be a bit on the too intimate side, but didn’t really want to deny
Khan again. This was obviously very important to him. “Jim stay. What Jim do? Sit?” He
gestured to the chairs or the bed and even the floor, if that was where Khan wanted him to be.

"Yes, good. Good, Jim." Khan said and gave a gentle kiss to the side of Jim's cheek. "Khan, Jim, sit.
Floor. Good." Khan said, then lead by example. "Hand. Jim." He asked, for the first time initiating
that they hold hands.

Jim took hold of Khan’s hand and smiled at him, the kiss a brand against his cheek. “Khan hand is
big. Bigger than Jim hand. Jim want Khan hand.” He settled himself as carefully as possible and
waited to see what might come next.

"Khan speak, Khan words." He said, indicating that he would be speaking his own language. 
Nahkmet, beloved Lion of the Sun. You have given us our lives, and shown us love. We are grateful
for this life, as yours was the first act of love, that continues to protect us. Nahkmet- " Khan lightly
closed his eyes as he invoked her name. A soft purr began to rumble from his chest, and as his head
began to lull back on his shoulders, his face began to transform. His black hair, turned into a thick,
coarse black mane. And his words were now the sounds of a lion, roaring to the heavens as his
features shifted into the face of a lion.

“Holy fucking shit!” Jim shrieked (and later was so glad that there was nobody there besides Khan to
hear the note his voice hit) and nearly hurtled backward in sheer instinctive response. He landed in
an unainly heap some few feet away, staring at Khan with eyes that resembled the saucers on the
table and heart trying to race right out his throat and out the nearest door. “Khan? Khan is lion?” he
asked, the words a squeak that trembled on every syllable.

The effect did not hold long, as the lion head was large for the human body which did not yet
transform. So it faded quickly, until Khan looked like himself again. He slumped to the floor and
sighed deeply, as if he had experienced an almost erotic sensation from the change. "Khan, Lion of

Jim stared at him, only vaguely aware of how far open his mouth currently hung. He shook his
head, jaw closing with a snap, after a few moments, and slowly approached the other man. “Khan?”
he asked, aware of noises outside of the door, other people in the inn disturbed by the sound of
roaring coming from their room. He hauled himself up and tried to make himself look respectable,
heading for the door to answer the knocks. He took a few moments to reassure the management and
other guests, letting the manager poke his head in to content himself that Jim was not housing a
dangerous animal. Though he did not let them get a good look at Khan. After he shooed everyone
away, he returned to Khan’s side and slowly sat next to him. “Khan demi-god,” he said firmly.

Feeling quite good from the experience, Khan was only vaguely aware that Jim had gone to the door
to speak to people. But when he came back to sit next to him, he shifted on the floor to rest his head
on Jim's lap. He sighed and gave a slow stretch of his back, arms, and legs. "Khan ...?" He
prompted, not knowing this term.
Jim lightly stroked Khan’s hair, the action instinctive and almost as much to soothe himself as to please his companion. “God with man is demi-god. Khan is demi-god. Khan speak to Gods. Khan be lion.” He shivered a little and repeated slowly, “Khan be lion.” A hint of fear entered his voice at the memory, the way his friend had suddenly been an apex predator, just a hairsbreadth away from his unprotected self. It had been a shock, a terror honestly, and he was just now letting himself process that fact.

Khan turned his head in Jim’s lap to look up at his friend. Yes, Khan speaks to the Gods. Had Jim not believed him when he said it before? But there was more to it than that. Perhaps, Jim had not met anyone like Khan before. Though to be fair, Khan had not met others like himself, either. "Jim ... Jim?" Khan sat up to look his friend over. "Jim, scared?"

Jim nodded a few times and murmured, “A little. Khan ...” He touched Khan’s face delicately, like he was searching for where the hair and whiskers came from. “Khan is lion. No other man lion. No other woman lion. Just Khan.” His mouth suddenly twitched and pulled into a huge smile, eyes lighting with something new—delight. “Khan amazing.”

But like any cat, Khan glowed and basked at the attention. He purred softly at the touch and the praise, and smiled when Jim smiled. It did not occur to him that Jim would be scared, and so the smiled assured him that Jim wasn’t that scared. "Khan, Lion of the Desert." Khan placed a hand on Jim's shoulder to keep them both grounded together. "Khan, Jim, best friends."

Jim chuckled and said, “I didn’t realize you meant it so literally. But Khan is Lion of the Desert. A real lion sometimes. Maybe. Only your head changed. I wonder if the rest of you can.” His hands were busy still stroking the face and hair of his friend, almost unconsciously now, though he wouldn’t have been surprised to suddenly encounter soft fur. “Best friends,” he assured the other man, as he refocused on Khan again. “Hello.”

They were greeting each other? "Hello," Khan laughed gently at this. But he dropped his hand away from Jim and placed it on his own chest, "Khan." He said, indicating to himself. "Jim." He said, then used the same hand to indicate to Jim in turn.

“Lion of the desert. Man.” Jim counter-introduced, putting a hand on each of their chests, as well. “I think there is much more to learn about you than ever. Khan is the gift that keeps on giving. Jim is lucky to be best friend of Khan.” He leaned down and rested their foreheads together in an intimate gesture of closeness. “Thank you.”

"Happy." Khan said, lightly closing his eyes. He remained settled in this peaceful moment for quite some time before normal, every-day thoughts began to return to his mind. "Jim? What is- days, to Jim home?" He asked, wondering how long it would take to get to where Jim was from.

“We’re going to see a friend of mine first for a few days,” Jim said. “About 30 days.” He made the correct gestures with his hands. “We’ll ride a few back trails to get there. My mom and Chris will be waiting. They’re expecting me back ... but not with a friend.” He lightly patted Khan’s chest. “Khan like Jim home.”

"Yes? Good. Khan go, Jim home. Family. Friend. We go. Horses, happy." Khan imagined that the horses would be very pleased indeed to be on the road again. Even if the environment was unlike anything they, or Khan, had encountered before. He had certainly never seen anything like New York before. So many buildings pressed up close to one another. And people, too. Smelly. With waste in the streets. And mud thick and deep enough to lose a small child in. Khan hoped that not all of America was like this, because he was not impressed with it.

“I’ll be happy, too, to get out in the country again and see home,” Jim said and then pushed lightly at
Khan. “Up. Up. Bath. Than sleep. Jim tired. Nap now. Prepare trip after. Jim, Khan go see Bones tomorrow. Bones be happy.” He grinned at the thought of one of his closest friends, whom he so seldom saw since the doctor had taken up practice in New York, far from the memories of the wife who’d abandoned him and taken their child.

"Yes. Up. Bath. Sleep." Khan agreed to the terms and stood. He was interested in meeting Jim's friend and learning more. Even if communication was a problem, Khan had gotten to a point where he mostly understood what others were saying, even if he could not speak to them in their own language.

Jim admired the form of his friend for a brief moment, before feeling heat in his cheeks and turning away. Khan had not offered him sex, but some sort of ritual ‘thank you’ to his Goddess. This made Jim doubly glad he’d refused, since the meaning would have been very different between them. He still didn’t have the words to explain to Khan about what sex meant in modern times, especially the difficulties between two men. Or how deeply the betrayal of Carol Marcus had scarred his ability to allow for true lovers. “Yep, come on, Khan, time to get clean. I’ve been looking forward to an actual soak.”
Chapter 9

Dr. Leonard ‘Bones’ McCoy’s practice was on the outskirts of the city, in an area where both middle and lower income residents could visit and he might make home calls as needed. His house was small, but neat, kept up by his nurse/housekeeper Ms. Christine Chapel. She was competent enough to be a doctor herself, but for the times preventing her advance. Instead, she helped him both in the surgery and in the household. They were an excellent pair, though Jim never saw anything except friendship between them, perhaps because both of them had been burned by love before, just as much as him. Christine’s fiance had been killed in some sort of robbery, while Bones’ wife left him for another man, taking their daughter with her. No amount of searching had managed to turn them up, until Bones finally discovered they’d run South to Mexico.

Jim reined in *Sunrise* and grinned up at the facade of the Bones’ house and surgery. “Here we are, Khan,” he said. “This is Bones’ home. His real name is Leonard McCoy, but I call him Bones. For Sawbones ... or doctor. Hmm, not a word we’ve learned. You’ll see.” He carefully dismounted and tied his horses to the post in front of the house.

Even though a man wearing a headscarf was uncommon in the East, it was even more uncommon in the West. But today Khan had preferred to wear the dark blue headscarf when going out with Jim to navigate New York. It kept his long hair down and out of his face while riding, and was easy to draw across his mouth and nose when he caught a particularly sour smell from the streets.

"Jim friend, Bones, home." Khan said, acknowledging that he understood where they were. He dismounted Sunset and tied him off as well, but made sure there was suitable space between him and Sunrise, as the two, even with all they had been through together, sometimes still annoyed one another.

Jim had snagged a new hat for himself, Western cowboy style with a wide brim in a stylish white color, which would never last long, but he thought made him look dashing. He took this off as he knocked on his friend’s door, grinning when a grumpy, “Don’t you know to just come in?” came from the other side. He poked his head in and said, “Well, I wasn’t sure I was still welcome.”

“Jim!” Bones leaped up from his place at a writing table, where he’d been scrawling patient’s records on some paper. He was one of the first to believe keeping notes on all his patients was a good idea, but was happy to set it aside to embrace his oldest friend. “I didn’t know to expect you! Where are you coming from?”

“India!” Jim said with a laugh. “Land of exotic mystery ... and adventure. May I come in? I’ve got a friend with me. I’d like to introduce you.”

“India!” Jim said with a laugh. “Land of exotic mystery ... and adventure. May I come in? I’ve got a friend with me. I’d like to introduce you.”

“Of course! Haul yourselves inside. I’m delighted to meet anyone else fool enough to call you friend,” Bones said, already heading to snag a bottle of bourbon from his cabinet and pour three slugs.

“Come in, Khan,” Jim said, gesturing for the other man to come inside. “This is Dr. Leonard McCoy, or Bones, as I call him. Bones, this is Khan.”

Bones took a good look at the tall, pale, scarf wearing stranger that Jim brought in and raised an eyebrow at his friend, before extending a hand. “Pleased to meet you, Khan. Welcome to my humble home and office. Knowing Jim, you both need my professional services, as well as my friendship.”
“Booooones,” Jim groaned.

"Hello.” Khan said, though was still unaccustomed to touching hands as a form of greeting. He reached out and touched the palm of McCoy's hand, but before the man could get a firm grip on him, he pulled his hand away. "Doctor Bones, Jim friend. Good." He said by way of trying to express that it was good to meet him.

Both of Bones’ eyebrows went up at this greeting, but he offered Khan the drink. “Please have a drink. It’s my way of saying hello. You, too, infant.” He held out a drink to Jim, grabbing up his own as well.

Jim took the drink and said, “Khan’s still learning English, Bones. He’s amazing at it, too. He didn’t speak a word when I found him.”

“Found him ... I bet that’s a good story,” Bones said, but held out the glass in front of him. “To friends.”

“Friends,” Jim toasted and tapped his glass to Bones’. “Now Khan,” he said to his traveling companion.

Khan held up his drink to give it a sniff. It had a sharp, but almost sweet smell to it. Interesting. "Friends." Khan said, then repeated the gesture carefully, touching their glasses together. He would have to get a great deal of social cues from Jim and McCoy interacting together, but it was the best way to learn.

Bones tossed his drink back in a casual way that made Jim wince a little. He drank half of his own and set it aside for the moment, glancing at the other Khan with a nod. “It’s strong,” he said.

“And you’re going to need more of it before I’m done with you,” Bones said. “Come on into the surgery.”

“Aw, Bones,” Jim whined, but knew that his friend would not be satisfied until he gave Jim a full check-up. He snagged his glass, knowing he would need it later, and headed into the surgery. “Khan, come see. Bones is a doctor. Takes care of Jim.”

Khan took a cautious sip of the drink, then laughed almost immediately. "Alcohol? What an interesting gift.” He followed after Jim and was immediately mesmerized by a glass medicine cabinet that had hundreds of bottles inside, all individually labelled. It was amazing to see how many things had writing on it these days. And he was certain they each meant something important. Plus, a full size mirror! Khan examined it quite closely, seeing the reflection of himself and the two other men behind him. It almost made it look like there were six people in the room. But instead, he could see what Jim and McCoy were doing, without looking at them. "Look, this!"

Bones just shook his head and went about gathering his tools for an examination, letting Jim get distracted by his new friend for a moment.

“Mirror, yes,” Jim enthused and stood by Khan so they could both look over each other’s reflections. “You can see all of Khan. And all of Jim.” He had smiled at Khan’s reaction to the drink and pointed to it now. “What do you call this?”

"Yes, mirror." Khan said, eyes flickering over the image, not sure whose eyes to make contact with. "Drink name, alcohol." He said, then began to explain, "One alcohol, grain. Two alcohol, fruit. Three alcohol, honey. Good." Khan said, explaining that he knew alcohol in these three different forms.

“Get over here, infant,” Bones commanded. “And get off your shirt and pants.”

Jim groaned, but did as he was told, kicking off everything but his small clothes, which he left on with a defiant air. His body told the story of his adventuresome life, scarred in various places, though only one or two looked truly serious. He hopped up on Bones’ surgical table, glad that Christine insisted on keeping everything clean. He’d been in more than a few dank, dirty doctor’s surgeries, wishing they had a housekeeper as impeccable. He knew Bones would never manage it without her. “Khan watch Bones take care of Jim.”

Bones began a series of prodding and poking at Jim’s body, making a series of louder ‘humming’ noises as he went on, which used to worry his friend, but now just amused him. He knew Bones did not approve of his lifestyle and took care of him whenever he could, while grumbling all the while.

"Burr-bon.” Khan said, then took another sip. Though he was a little startled to see Jim suddenly start to take off his clothes. Had that been McCoy’s instruction? What was this for? He stepped closer to watch McCoy with a very critical eye. "What is-?” Khan prompted, pointing to the stethoscope that hung around McCoy’s neck. It was a strange looking necklace.

Bones grinned at the other man and asked, “Would you like a try, Khan?” He removed the stethoscope from his neck and carefully placed each side in Khan’s ears, before holding the other end to Jim’s chest. “Listen. Jim’s heart.” He wondered if the other man would understand, but thought he might enjoy the sound.

"Heart!” Khan announced almost instantly. How marvelous. He took the earpiece out, to listen to the silence of the room, then put them back in once more, to hear Jim’s heart, excited by the difference of hearing such a specific sound versus all the sounds of every-day life at once. "Jim, heart! Good!” He said, not because he knew what a good heartbeat was, but because hearing it was good and exciting to him.

“And cold,” Jim said as the metal was pressed to his chest, but couldn’t be upset when he saw how delighted Khan was. “Is it good, Bones?”

“I’ll find out after your friend is done,” Bones said with a slight smile of his own at the innocent excitement of the other man. “You should listen to you heart, Khan.” He gently moved the earpiece and placed it over the somewhat thin shirt. “It’ll be muffled, but you can still place it.”

Khan listened carefully, "Khan heart.” He said, blinking only once as he heart the thump of his own heart. Then like a child, he made a point of holding his breath, then made a collection of sounds, to see what effect that had on the sounds he heard. "Good!” He said, thinking that this tool was far more interesting than any of the other modern sights he had seen.

Jim grinned indulgently at his friend and said, “Yes, it’s very good that Khan has a heartbeat or else Bones would be very upset about your existence.” As it was, there were things he never planned to tell his very scientifically minded friend. “Want to let Bones use it on me and tell you if Jim is well?”

"Yes, listen. Jim, heart.” Khan said and pulled the earpieces out to put the device back on McCoy. And though the process and handling of what McCoy was doing with Jim was something he would be watching closely, Khan was also curious about the rest of the things in the room. Sterilized equipment. Some strange cylinder with a large needle. A shaped knife that was clearly specialized for something Khan was unfamiliar with.
“Thank you,” Bones said and took back his equipment. He listened to Jim’s heart, instructing him to breathe deeply now and then. He took notes, nodding and muttering to himself as he went, before saying, “Well, that part of you still goes strong. Now, I’m just going to check over a few trouble spots.” He checked over some obvious wound scars and a few places that he knew Jim had been wounded before. “Not much new, at least.”

“Just a few scars here and there,” Jim reported, even as he groaned when Bones pressed into a knot of tension in his back.

"Jim, good? No, sick?" Khan asked. To his eyes, Jim was perfectly fine, but perhaps there were new illnesses he did not know about these days. Still, he did not get any implication that Jim was unwell in the time they knew each other, except for the injury to his heart and arm, that Marcus had left.

“Lie back,” Bones ordered, so he could check the softer areas of Jim’s abdomen and thighs. In Khan’s presence, he still didn’t hesitate to demand, “You been taking care about where you stick your penis?”

“Bones!” Jim yelled and practically turned into a tomato.

“What? You’ve got no shame. And anyone who’s your friend better not have, either,” Bones said. “And it’s not like you’re not expecting the question. We’ve been down this road before.”

“I’ve been like a monk,” Jim said through gritted teeth, ignoring the snort of disbelief.

“Khan, apparently, you’re going to need to leave the room for a few moments, so I can check over Jim’s more intimate places,” Bones told the new man, trying not to look too amused.

Khan however was not sure he understood what was being told to him. "Khan ... leave? Leave, Jim?" He asked, observing how Jim was made to lay out on his back as a means to submit to medical examination.

“No, it’s alright,” Jim soothed and smiled at Khan. “Just look at Bones’ stuff? Have you got anything that might interest him?”

Bones nodded and said, “Microscope. I just got one and some interesting slides to look at.” He stood and gestured to Khan. “Let me show you something that’s interesting, Khan.” He walked over and uncovered a brand new microscope, obviously proud of the instrument. A box of slides sat nearby, and he chose a clean one, before adding a drop of water from a bottle containing river water for him to look at. “Look at the animals, Khan,” he said, demonstrating how to use the eyepieces.

Oh, good. He was not being told to leave. He smiled at Jim, a little uncertain as to why he had been asked to go, then, but follow McCoy's direction. He sat on on stool and looked through the eyepiece as directed. "Ah! Move!" Khan smiled and was glued to the microscope, fascinated by the sight of seeing things so small, that they could not be seen otherwise, except with this device.

Bones nodded and hurried back to Jim’s side to check on his genitals, where he had found problems before. He acted quickly and with professionalism, not letting his touch be anything more than necessary. A pleased nod followed his examination, and he allowed Jim to cover up again.

“How many animals do you see in the water, Khan?” Jim asked, as Bones checked him over, not wanting his new friend to deviate from his close observation through the microscope until Bones finished.

"One, two ..." Khan settled in, deeply focused as he tracked the moving objects, making sure not to count the same ones over. "Six! Six, move ... small ..." Khan said, pulling his head back from the
eyepiece to look at where the slide fit and how it looked like barely anything.

“Are they all the same kind of animal?” Jim asked, now curious himself about all of the creatures in a tiny drop of water. He continued to lay back as Bones finished his physical assessment, wincing at a couple of tender spots, old injuries that still tweaked him sometimes.

“You seem to be well,” Bones said with satisfaction, pleased that his friend had returned without any serious complaints. “Still a bit underweight . . .”

"Two, animal." Khan declared, at least to his understanding of what he was seeing. "One animal, circle. One animal ... rope.” He said, using the best words he had to describe what he was seeing. "Jim, look?” He asked, turning to look at his friend with a hopeful smile.

“But all cleared per Bones’ exam,” Jim said, already hopping up and pulling on his clothes. “I’ll be right there, Khan. I want to see this microscope in action, too. Mom doesn’t really share hers.” He tugged his shirt over his arms as he walked over to Khan. “Show me, Khan?”

Bones followed closely after, curious about the relationship between the two men, as well as about the new man in general.

"Jim, eye- look." Khan said, explaining to Jim how to use the microscope. "Jim, look. Moving!" Khan said, getting out of the way so that Jim could see for himself.

Jim grinned and patted Khan’s right shoulder, before looking into the eyepieces. “Oh, hey, that is a lot of stuff.” He pulled his head back and peered at the drop of water. “You mean all of that is in the stuff we drink?”

“Yep,” Bones said. “I’ve found that boiling water tends to kill them all, but their bodies are still there.”

Jim’s nose wrinkled in distaste. “I prefer to stick to my ancient history and artifacts. Your science is just disgusting. Blood and guts and animals in the water.” He looked back into the microscope. “Do they all have names, Khan?”

"Names?” Khan was unsure if Jim was asking him to name them, like the horses, or if they had names in his language. "No Khan word, name." He said, not knowing what he had been looking at, other then it was small and alive.

Jim looked to Bones, who shook his head in answer, as well. “I haven’t had time to check the latest reports to see if these little beasties have names yet. If not, one of them will be named Kirkus,” Bones said with an amused smile.

“And you call yourself my friend,” Jim said with a little sneer at the doctor.

“I’d like to give your new friend a check-up, too,” Bones said with a glance at Khan. “If you’ve brought him here from a distant land, he may never have been looked at by a doctor before.”

“Well, that’s true,” Jim said slowly and turned to Khan. “Khan let Bones check?”

Khan had watched the two as they exchanged words, trying to determine what was being said. Something about their friendship, he understood. Something about the land, and about the doctor. “Khan ... Bones?” He asked, indicating to himself, then to McCoy, and stepped closer as if that would help confirm the instruction Jim was giving him.

“Bones look over Khan,” Jim said and pointed at the table where he’d been lying. “Make sure Khan
not sick. Jim be right here.”

Bones said, “I’ll take care of you, Khan. Just like I take care of Jim. Jim’s friend is my friend.” He lightly patted the table to indicate that Khan should take a seat. “Please.”

"Khan, no sick.” Khan said, but was willing enough to do what Jim and McCoy were asking. So he sat on the exam table and waited, watching McCoy, curious to know what it would feel like, since he had already seen the doctor examine Jim just a few minutes before.

“Do you mind if I ask you to take off your shirt and pants?” Bones asked and lightly tugged at the material.

“Khan shirt off?” Jim asked and pointed at the garment. “And pants.” He indicated those, too. “Just so Bones can check that Khan well.”

Khan was not shy about his body, but he did not know McCoy, even if he was Jim's friend. Still, he listened to Jim. He took off his headscarf and shirt, which he set behind him on the table, then stood briefly to remove his pants. "Khan, well.” He assured, but then sat down again, still showing that he was willing to undergo the examination.

Bones nodded and said, “Thank you,” even as Jim stood beside Khan to make sure he could reassure him as needed. “I'm going to just give you a brief physical examination now, Khan.” He lightly checked out the other man’s limbs, noting that he was as well built as Jim, possibly better. Every muscle was defined and in premium shape, beyond what Bones usually saw in even the strongest ox of a man. “Will you pull back when I push?” he asked, taking one of Khan’s hands.

“Bones pull. Khan push,” Jim said in explanation and nodded encouragement to his new friends.

"Push, Bones?” Khan wanted to confirm, then gave a push with his hand. He showed no strain on his part, but the push was strong enough to put some distance between himself and the doctor. He did not know what this was meant to show or prove, but he looked to Jim to make sure he was doing it right.

Bones gave a noise of surprise and lurched backward at the force Khan used, even as Jim laughed a little at the look of shock. “Well, we’re not worried about your strength,” he said with a shake of his head. “Let’s try the other side.” He switched sides and offered his hand again. “Please push.”

“You’re doing great, Khan,” Jim said with a happy expression on his face, amused by the interaction between his two closest friends, one old and one new. “Just be careful with Bones.”

"Gentle?” Khan prompted, and this time pushed McCoy's hand much slower, showing great control over the force he could use. "Gentle, push.”

“That’s still impressive,” Bones said and made more notes. “In fact, more than normally so.” He spared a glance between the two men, wondering just where Jim had found Khan. “May I listen to your heart, Khan?”

"Yes, heart. Listen, Khan heart.” Khan said, still completely relaxed. Having seen McCoy do it with Jim, he knew what to expect, and now had the luxury of knowing what his own heart sounded like, when amplified with the medical tool.

Bones pulled out the stethoscope and pressed it to Khan’s chest. “Deep breath, please,” he said. He moved the diaphragm around on the other man’s front, asking for deep breaths each time, before switching it to his back. “Your heart is very slow, but strong,” he said. “I’ve never heard anyone with this kind of beat.” He shook his head at the strangeness of the other man, before handing the
Khan was eager to listen to his heart again, thinking this was a marvel. He put the earpieces back in and listened, "Yes, good." He said, clearly not having any problem with it. "Strong. Good, strong." Khan took them out then offered them to Jim, "Jim, listen. Khan, heart."

"Alright, Khan. Jim listen." Jim stepped forward and listened to the heart and then, a little devilish, he reached out and began to stroke through Khan’s long hair. He really wanted to hear the rumbling purr magnified through the stethoscope, as well. “Khan heart amazing,” he said, throwing in some praise to make purring more likely.

And it worked, of course. Jim had known Khan long and well enough to be able to coax this response out of his friend. Khan lightly closed his eyes, enjoying the attention and began to purr softly. If Jim wanted to stop and pet his hair and feed him compliments every day, Khan was more then willing to sit there and take it.

Bones’ eyes bugged, as Jim knew they would, and his hands moved to Khan’s throat to lightly touch and feel the rumble through them. “That’s not a sound a person makes, Jim,” he said. “I’ve never seen anyone like Khan before.”

“He’s not like anyone else, Bones,” Jim said. “And that’s why we have to head home tomorrow, instead of staying to visit.”

“You always bring something back that the Marcuses want,” Bones said with a hint of anger, knowing instantly what Jim meant. “You never get to visit like you say you want.”

“This time it’s more important than ever, Bones,” Jim said, still stroking Khan’s hair to keep him calm. “I know you’d never tell anyone, but Khan isn’t just another man, and I need to get him home.”

Khan continued to purr softly, though did allow his eyes to open somewhat to look at the doctor when he spoke. He could hear some stress in his voice, especially at the mention of Marcus. "Khan, Jim, go ... travel, Jim home." Khan said, knowing this was the plan. "Bones go, Jim home?" He asked, wondering if McCoy was coming with them.

“I can’t go with you,” Bones said. “This is my home. My surgery. But just once, I’d like Jim to be able to stay for longer than an afternoon.” He shook his head and continued with his examination, taking even carefuller notes now, understanding this might be a unique opportunity. “Do you know how old you are Khan?”

It was too bad that the doctor could not come with them, as it was clear that Jim and McCoy were friends, and that McCoy wanted to look after Jim, or at least visit with him for longer. "Old ... Khan, age?" Khan tried to confirm that was the information McCoy was after. "Khan ... age, no." He said, not knowing how long he had been in the tomb, to even make a guess at his age.

Jim said, “I found him alive at the center of a temple that was thousands of years old. He was obviously part of the artifacts.” He didn’t hide things from Bones and thought his friend might believe him.

But the doctor’s mind balked at such an idea. “That’s impossible,” Bones said flatly, staring at Khan. “A million ways impossible, Jim. You must have made some sort of mistake.”

“No, Bones, I mean it,” Jim said. “And I’ve seen Khan do incredible things since I freed him and started to run from the Marcuses. Can you imagine what they’d try to do to him? And even though
he’s brilliant and strong, he wasn’t in the best shape when I found him and he doesn’t know this world, Bones. They’d lock him away or torture him or display him like some sort of pet, anything to make the most out of him. I can’t let that happen.”

Again, that stress was in their voices. Khan looked between McCoy and Jim. "Marcuses bad, hurt Jim. Dangerous." He said, wanting to at least add to the conversation that he knew this fact. "Temple, Khan home. Khan go, Jim. Jim home."

Bones scowled and said, “You’re right they did. Did you see the biggest scar Jim has? That’s because of them. He nearly died making sure some dumb artifact didn’t get into their hands.”

“It wasn’t dumb,” Jim countered. “It was priceless and important. And they would have just sold it off to the highest bidder without regard to its heritage.”

“Wasn’t worth your life,” Bones snapped.

“Well, Khan is,” Jim said quietly. “He’s more than just an artifact …”

Bones softened and looked at Khan a moment, before nodding a few times. “Yeah, alright, infant, I know. We’ll make sure you’re well supplied and out of here early tomorrow. And I’ll make to throw up a few false trails, too, so they don’t know which road out you took.”

“That’s my Bones,” Jim said and stepped over to give the other man a hug. “Now, are you done with Khan?”

“Not yet. I want to finish my exam. Is that alright, Khan?”

Khan was initially ruffled by the escalating argument. He did not want Jim to be threatened, even by a friend. But the argument seemed to pass quickly, as Jim and McCoy soon hugged after. "Yes. Exam, Khan. Good. Yes, Bones." He said, consenting for the man to continue.

Bones made a groaning noise and said, “Darn it, Jim, you’ve got everybody calling me Bones now,” but wasn’t really very put out by the nickname. He knew it meant Jim valued his friendship. He carefully finished his examination of lungs and limbs, making copious notes and setting aside his tools. "Have you ever been sick, Khan?"

"Khan sick? No. Khan no, sick." Khan answered, understanding that this had been a question, rather than the doctor telling him a fact.

"Amazing. Have you ever been hurt, Khan?” Bones asked.

“Like Jim when he hit his head,” Jim said, though he figured Khan understood, based on his answer to the first question. He found these questions as fascinating as Bones, since they helped piece together more about the man. If man he truly could be called.

"Yes, Jim hurt head." Khan said and pointed to the spot on Jim's forehead where he had been injured and bleeding. "Khan spoke Jim, sit. Stay." Khan said, telling the doctor what had happened. "Khan, no hurt head. Khan, no cut, no blood. Khan, no break bone. Khan, no hurt."

“You hurt your head?” Bones asked dangerously, and Jim knew a mistake had been made.

“Not very much,” he said weakly. “Khan made sure I took care of myself. Right, Khan? You didn’t let me do anything dangerous.” He smiled hopefully at his companion, though he knew Khan would probably just tell the truth objectively, as he seemed to.
"Khan spoke Jim, sit. Stay." Khan said again, explaining that he had told Jim to sit down and not move after the head injury. "Jim, good, no hurt now." As for dangerous, the only thing he knew about danger was related to the Marcusus. "No Marcusus hurt Jim. Boat, hurt Jim. Khan, Jim go Jim home. No Marcusus. Safe."

"Sit. Stay. That sounds about right," Bones said with a smirk at his friend, eyes warm. "And Jim can find danger anywhere. He needs somebody to look after him." He patted Khan on the back, friendly. "Thank you for taking care of Jim. You can get dressed now." His focus turned back to the youngest man. "Get over here and let me take a closer look at your head, infant!"

"Aww, Bones," Jim groaned, but dutifully allowed the doctor to examine his scalp and forehead, muttering to himself about how he couldn’t ever let his guard down with Jim and how did he manage to miss this?

Khan dressed once more, pulling on his pants as he stood, followed by his shirt, but this time left the scarf over his shoulders until they were to leave and ride again. It was interesting to watch how Jim and McCoy talked to one another, there was affection there, but it was matched with strange words.

Jim smiled at Khan, even as Bones made a few last grumbles and notes, before letting him go. "Now can we have some of the Southern hospitality, Bones? We haven’t had lunch yet. While we get the horses put away for the day, you can put out lunch! Khan hungry?"

"Lunch, good." Khan agreed. He followed Jim’s schedule and plans for where they were to go, and when they had time to stop to eat. So if that meant they had time to stay for lunch, Khan had no problem with it.

Jim nodded at Khan and said, “Khan’s right. Lunch is good. You heard the man, Bones. We’ll be back and expecting a feast.”

Bones hmphed in a good-natured fashion and said, “You’ll eat what I choose to feed you, infant,” even as he went to see what Christine might have in the house.

With a trail of laughter, Jim headed back outside for their horses, trusting Khan to follow him. He knew Bones would have a comfortable place for them for the day and night, before they all hit the trail again. “Khan like Bones?” he asked as they unhitched the horses and began to lead them to the stable.

"Bones, good man. Grumpy man. Jim, good friend." Khan had observed, walking with Jim to get the horses.

Jim chuckled and said, “Yeah, he is a good man. And all the grumpiness just hides his big heart. Bones hurt, too. Like Jim. Heart hurt. But he is a good friend to Jim. Good friend to Khan, in time.” He opened the barn door and led his pair inside, heading for some stalls. “Last stable for awhile all, so enjoy it.”

"Much better then the boat. " Khan said to the horses, "You can still move, and even lay down if you get tired of standing. You will be safe and comfortable here, we will not be far away. We have a long way to go, still. That is what Jim says." Khan said, making sure they each had access to fresh water.

Jim set their tack safely away and made sure his pair were curried and combed until they gleamed, giving Bones plenty of time for preparing lunch. He also knew that Khan would take care of his own pair in the same thorough fashion. He checked their water and forage, before returning to Khan’s side. “Ready?”
"Yes, lunch." Khan said and reached out to take Jim's arm, familiar with the gesture and his close company.

Jim held on to Khan’s arm and leaned into him, smiling at the other man brightly. “My guess is that he’ll serve us something Southern. Christine will indulge him in the mood. And she likes me, despite everything.” He steered his friend back toward the house. “You’ve never had Southern cooking. I promise you a good surprise.”

"Good evening, gentlemen." Christine said, greeting the men at the front door. As a woman who was part nurse, part therapist, part housekeeper, and part cook, she welcomed the men into McCoy's house as if it were her own. "I will show you through to the kitchen to wash-"

“Christine!” Jim exclaimed in delight. “Hello!” He bounded up the steps and held out a friendly hand for a shake. “It’s great to see you again!” With his other hand, he gestured for Khan to come forward. “And please meet my friend, Khan. Khan, this is Christine. She’s both intelligent and beautiful ... not to mention, she takes good care of Bones.”

"Yes, the Doctor mentioned that trouble had been invited to stay." Christine said with a smile, shaking his hand and giving a polite kiss to his cheek. "It is good to see you. Come in." She said, then extended her hand to Khan, "It is a pleasure to meet you, Khan."

"Hello." Khan said, lightly shaking her hand before pulling his hand away.

Jim smiled and returned the kiss lightly, before stepping back to let Christine precede them in. “I hope you’ve made chicken and dumplings for lunch,” he said. "With some of those delicious biscuits ... and maybe even vegetables?” His stomach rumbled even at his own mention of food, feeling empty. He looked hopefully at Christine, who was one of the finest cooks he knew, on top of everything else.

Christine thought it was strange that Khan did not want to shake hands, but suspected it must be something to do with local custom, from where he is from. Perhaps he was from a culture, where men were not to touch women, unless they were married to them. She was curious about Jim's guest, but would make her questions and observations discreet. "Yes, a few favourites to fill you up. Come through, come through-"

“Thank you, Christine,” Jim said and gestured for Khan to come through. “Christine has made us an amazing lunch, Khan. Come on and try it.” He took Khan’s hand and gently guided him into the house. “We need to wash first.” He led him through to the sink and pumped water into a pitcher for them, pouring the water into a basin. He also picked up soap and offered it to Khan. “Face and hands wash.”

Lathering his hands with soap, Khan washed them clean up to his wrists. Then bent over the basin of water and washed his face, more than willing to clean away the grit and smell of the city and their ride. Feeling refreshed, Khan used a hand towel to pat his face dry, then used his fingers to brush his hair back, wanting it to look combed and neat for sitting and eating as a guest in McCoy's house.

Jim smiled at Khan’s small vanity, before cleaning himself in a similar fashion. “Khan look good. Jim look good?” he asked, turning around for the other man to inspect him from head to toe. He grinned at the other man, playful and hoping Khan would catch on.

"Yes, Jim good. Pretty, Jim." Khan said with a smile. "Lunch, now." He said, keeping close to his friend again. Having not eaten with others, he was unsure of the traditions and customs, but wanted to be respectful as a guest.
“Pretty?” Jim asked and then laughed a little. “Thank you for the compliment, Khan. This will be
the first time we’ve eaten with anybody else much, huh? Sharing the tables with the sailors wasn’t
quite the same. But this isn’t fancy. And the food is simple, but amazing.” He offered his arm
again. “Do you think Christine is pretty, too?”

“Yes, Christine pretty.” Khan agreed as he linked arms with Jim. "Good smile. Smart eyes. Nice
hair.” Khan said, following Jim’s lead.

“Almost as nice as my hair, huh?” Jim asked with a teasing lilt in his tone. He led Khan through to
the table and grinned to find Bones setting out huge, warm biscuits. “Hand them over now, please,”
he directed, taking a seat and patting the chair next to him for Khan to sit. “Please, here, Khan.
Need any help, Bones?”

“You’re guests, and you know that means you sit and enjoy,” Bones said in the tone of a well-worn
argument. “I’ll be back with more food. I know your legs are hollow.”

"Christine, nice hair. Jim, gold hair. Favorite.” Khan said and sat down in the chair Jim had
indicated. The table settings were indeed quite different from their meals together on the boat, or
anywhere else for that matter. Khan picked up one of the plates and began to examine the edges of
the china, curious by how it was made and how all the other plates were made to match.

“Awww, Bones set out the good china,” Jim said and lifted the plate in front of him to look at the
pattern. “This is pretty. Look at the flowers.”

Bones carried out a bowl full of chicken and dumplings and huffed a little at Jim. “What are you
doing, infant? You can’t eat that.”

“Khan has never seen such fancy dishware before,” Jim said with a nod to his companion. “He likes
them ... and I’ve never really noticed, but these are your good dishes. Thanks, Bones.”

The doctor rolled his eyes and said, “You’re my best friend. Of course we serve you properly. I’ll
go check if Christine is ready.”

Setting down the plate, Khan looked to Jim and asked softly, "What is- infant?” McCoy had used the
term several times now in talking to Jim, and Khan was unclear on what the word was intended to
mean.

With a serving dish of beets and green beans, Christine added the vegetable dish to the table. Then lit
a few extra candles in the room to give them extra light for afternoon. The Doctor very rarely
entertained guests, so it was definitely worth seeing their faces all the more clearly now that they had
Jim and his companion over.

Jim chuckled and leaned in closer to Khan to say, “Bones means Jim is like a child. Infant means
baby. Little man. Not grown-up.” He did not mind the term at all, since Bones used it with too
much affection to be truly insulting. “This all looks wonderful, Christine,” he said, gesturing to all of
the food on the table.

"Jim, baby?” Khan looked his friend over, trying to determine why this would be. He was not
physically a baby, obviously, but maybe in comparison to McCoy, it was meant to describe how
much younger Jim was. "Hm."

"Thank you.” Christine said as she took her seat. "There is also pie in the oven, should you leave
enough room for it, after lunch.”

“I always leave room for your pie, Christine,” Jim said and looked over at Khan, “and advise you do
"Khan was trying to understand why Bones refers to me as an infant. Maybe you can help him, Christine?"

"Oh-" Christine folded her hands across her lap as she looked to Khan. She did not know his exact command of English, but spoke to him as she would any other. "It is a term of endearment, Khan, at least for the Doctor and Jim. It is not a nickname I would tolerate myself, but for them, it is used to express both exasperation, and affection."

"Mostly exasperation," Bones said, walking in with a bottle of wine in his hands. He had uncorked it and now poured a generous libation in each person’s glass. "He’s not always been very responsible, especially about his health. Like a kid, not wanting to go to the doctor. Even when the doctor is a close friend."

Khan carefully listened to the explanation that Jim, Christine, and McCoy all gave. He was not sure about the word, exasperation, but from context of this and other conversations, he gathered that it had something to do with Jim being difficult. Khan had felt that way too sometimes when speaking with Jim, sometimes communicating with him was difficult and they would both get annoyed. But not recently. "Difficult, friend." Khan said, but smiled at Jim, seeing now that others experienced him in a similar way.

"Now you’re catching on," Bones said and lifted his glass before he sat. "To good friends and good food." He held his glass to be tapped.

"To Bones and Christine, always there when I need you," Jim said and clinked his glass with Bones. He nodded at Khan to clink his glass, too. "Don’t have to say anything, but you can if you want, Khan."

Khan followed by example and tapped the edge of his wine glass with the others. "Thank you." Was all that he felt he could add to what had already been said.

"It is a pleasure to have you." Christine said after the toast. "Now then, Jim, how long was this last expedition, and what did you find?" She asked, always deeply curious about Jim's adventures and traveling. Serving the vegetable dish onto her own plate, she then passed it along to Jim to help himself.

"Not as long as I would have liked," Jim confessed with a low sigh. "We determined that the Marcus group was on to the trail shortly after us, so I had to rush through the entire process. I really miss doing things the way they should be with a lot of research and months in the field to properly excavate everything. And going alone just to get what I can, sucks, too. I managed to snag a few scrolls that look amazing and some of the more precious objects at the center of the temple." He reached out a hand under the table and lightly patted Khan’s leg.

"It was a massive temple, Christine, in the middle of a lush jungle. It had been covered for centuries and only recent flooding had brought it to light. The culture is not one I’m very familiar with, but I’m pretty sure mom knows more. I’m hoping she can tell me a lot more once I bring everything back to her. And I made sure to get the most important objects I could, since you know both of the Marcuses will not care about keeping the history intact. If they even do a full catalog beyond the auction catalog, I’ll be shocked. I’m hoping I can go back and learn as much as I can from what they inevitably leave behind as being too inexpensive to bother with. Some year, anyway …"

"Oh, that is unfortunate." Christine agreed with a small frown. "It is frustrating, to work so hard, and not see the full reward of your work." She knew a little something about that after all, as a woman in medicine, that only doctor McCoy took seriously and appreciated her contributions to the science and
research. "I hope you get the opportunity to go back."

"Worse than unfortunate," Bones growled, knowing how much it hurt Jim to see archaeological treasures destroyed in the name of greed, not to mention how Carol Marcus had injured Jim in body and heart.

Jim smiled at his true friend, grateful for the depth of his support, and said, “Mom and Chris are hoping to get back to some sites that old man Marcus tore apart about ten years ago. He’s lost interest now in them. But mom and Chris are hoping that there’s still some value in the materials they did leave behind. You two should go visit them sometime.”

"I would love that," Christine said, then gave McCoy a very significant look, "but that would require someone being willing to leave the surgery, never mind, the state.” Christine said, knowing that if the Doctor could spend his entire life in one room and never go outside and interact with anyone every again, he would choose that option.

Bones sighed and said, “I’d have to find someone to take over my surgery for while we were away. Someone to trust to look after this house, too. But if you wanted to go, I can look after myself for awhile. As long as you have someone trustworthy to travel with …”

“Christine can look after herself,” Jim said with a little nod in her direction. “And mom and Chris will make sure she has lots of fun with them. But I’m afraid you’d starve to death.” He served himself a huge helping of chicken and dumplings and offered the dish to Khan.

"Thank you, Jim. But I cannot have the Doctor starving to death on my conscience." Christine said. Even though the two of them were not lovers, they were still quite close. And had fallen into an arrangement that suited them both. Christine felt and displayed a great deal of loyalty to McCoy, which including going where he went, or more often than not, staying behind with him.

Khan accepted the tray and served himself a small portion of chicken to be polite, as well as the dumplings. Western food was new to him, and this was apparently, Southern, which was something he had yet to experience.

“Let me know if you like it,” Jim said to Khan and lightly bumped their shoulders, a gesture of friendship. He looked back to Christine. “We could always hire someone to look after Bones for a few months. I mean … he’s not that bad.”

Bones grumbled a little in Jim’s direction, but said, “I don’t want to spoil a chance at some fun for you, Christine. We can figure out a way. Besides, there’s nothing firm to plan yet.” He shoveled in some dumplings. “Mmmm. Best since my grandma’s.”

Christine smiled at the Doctor, but made no gesture of affection such as reaching out to him or touching him. They were close, but physical touch was not apart of their closeness. Unlike what Jim and Khan appeared to have. "If you weren't so scared of happiness, I think you might actually enjoy the trip."

Khan however made a small prayer over his chicken before eating it. "Thank you for the gift of your life, so that we might live." He said, then began to eat the food that had been prepared for them.

Bones said, “If I was afraid of happiness, I couldn’t eat your food.” He picked up a biscuit and slathered butter on it, before nearly eating an entire half with one bite. And his moan was practically indecent.

Jim said, “I was never as smooth as you, Bones, no matter what you think. That line was priceless.”
He smiled at Christine and asked, “What do you think, Christine?”

Christine however did not comment, but reached for her wine to take a sip. She smiled at the Doctor, aware that he could have just as easily delivered a grumpy response, rather then the compliment. She did worry and fuss over him, but no more then he needed, or deserved. "How are you enjoying lunch, Khan?" She asked, changing the subject.

"Yes, good. Good food. Thank you." Khan said.

“All of this food is new to Khan,” Jim said. “I sure wasn’t able to give him much in the way of cooking on the road. And food on a ship is not all that fancy, either, though I did the best I could. We had some good cooking before we left port, but nothing much since that time. Now, he’s going to have to suffer through my cooking again for a few more weeks until we get home ... well, my home.” He buttered a biscuit and offered half to Khan. “Please try this.”

"Yes, Jim." Khan said and accepted the biscuit. He gave it a sniff, then took a careful bite. But as soon as the butter and the warm bread hit his tongue, Khan was humming with approval. "Good, very good." He said and continued to eat the rest of it. And though it was hardly a healthy choice, Khan found himself seriously considering eating the entire batch that Christine had baked.

Jim chuckled at the response and held up the other piece for him to have, too. “These are the best biscuits ever made, right?” He snagged a second one for himself and took a large bite, sans butter, just enjoying the flaky goodness.

“I’m a lucky man. I know it. Christine is both an amazing doctor and an amazing cook. I’d be lost without her,” Bones said, scooping up some more of the rich dumplings.

"Yes, good." Khan said, eating more of the biscuit, but also enjoying the wine and the rest of the meal as well.

"Thank you, gentlemen for your compliments." Christine said with a smile, "One does like to be appreciated on occasion."

“Occasion? Bones, if you don’t show your appreciation for Ms. Christine everyday she’s with you, you’re not doing your job,” Jim said. “Christine, if you want to leave him to travel with us, you’re always welcome.”

Bones clasped his hands over his heart and made a wounded noise. “I’m deeply injured, Jim, that you would threaten to steal my right hand from me.” He looked to Christine and said, “Please don’t listen to that silver tongued devil.”

"Thank you Jim," Christine said with a smile, "But I will keep to my silver-tongue Southern devil. He suits me just fine." No, there was no way Christine would ever leave his side, even if McCoy ordered her away. She simply would refuse to abandon him.

“Christine and Bones best friends,” Jim said to Khan. “Bones lucky man. Christine refuse be best friends with Jim and Khan.” He shook his head sadly, even as his mouth quirked into a grin he couldn’t quite hide.

Bones just looked smug and snorted at the other man. “Southern trumps Iowa boy anytime.”

Khan however took it all very seriously. Christine and McCoy were best friends? That was good. There was nothing wrong with that. "Khan, new friend, Christine. Khan, new friend, Bones." He said, believing that not everyone needed to be best friends, but good friends, and in this case, new friends, was suitable.
“Don’t besmirch my home just because we’re new to the Union,” Jim said with a light wave of his hand in Bones’ direction. “And anyway, Khan is right. New friends are good, too.” He held up his glass and said, “To new friends.”

“New friends,” Bones agreed and raised his own glass in answer.

“New friends.” Christine agreed, holding up her glass. She had not seen Jim bring anyone home with him for a long time, not since Carol Marcus. Which suggested to her that Jim did not allow anyone to get close to him anymore, let alone close to his friends and family. So this was a promising sight, to see Jim with Khan, to share him and introduce him as a friend worth knowing.

Khan smiled, pleased that something he had said was worth the celebration. So he lifted his glass as well, to touch the rims with the other wine glasses like before.

“This is called a toast, Khan,” Jim said. “Which is confusing because a certain type of burned bread is also called toast. English makes no sense.” He downed the rest of the wine, figuring the words were worth the rest. “So, Bones, is business holding steady here?”

“Growing,” Bones said. “A lot of people in this city, Jim, and a lot of them don’t have much money. They pay me in trade or help around the house and surgery. Christine has a helper for almost every day of the week right now. But we’re doing well. No small thanks to the money from the sale of the farm.” It had hurt to sell his family’s home, but less than living there alone.

Christine knew it hurt the Doctor, to give up his home. But it would have been far worse for him to live there with the ghosts and echoes of his wife and daughter, no longer there. She also knew it hurt him to be unable to save every person who came to their door. There were more outbreaks of illness in the crowded city then in the country. And sometimes a new immigrant or a child, simply could no longer endure the stress on their immune system, which would sour the experience of coming to America, or starting a family in the city. "We do our best, in our corner of the world.” Christine said, more to assure the Doctor, then to explain to Jim.

“You do a damn good job,” Jim said firmly, eyes flicking to Bones to try and cement that into his brain. “Nobody could ask for better. You’re both amazing doctors, even if Christine doesn’t get the public credit she deserves. The people around here know it. Even in the few days I’ve been able to visit, I can tell from the way they act around you all.” He was glad Christine was always here to help bolster Bones’ uneasy ego.

Bones offered a smile at them and said, “I’m even hoping to get another pair of hands on so I can make more of the longer rounds to see some of my patients who don’t travel well more frequently. It’s not easy to find someone willing to work with the middle class and poor.”

"Perhaps as we approach the new century, medicine will also expand, to care for more than only the upper class." Christine said, but there was a lot that needed to change with the system before reaching that point. Including better safety standards for the working class, and allowing women, who had been unofficial household nurses and midwives for thousands of generations, be allowed to officially work in medicine.

“I hope some changes come faster than that,” Bones said with a smile for Christine. “You should be able to hang your own shingle, Christine. Dr. Chapel. Wouldn’t that be something?” He took a sip of his wine, enjoying the smooth alcohol without craving it as he once had.

Jim said, “Well, I’m glad you have the resources to do what you obviously care about. You’re doing a good thing here, Bones. Sometimes, you make me feel a bit like a wastrel.” He glanced at Khan and smiled. “But not right now.”
Though he understood that most of the conversation was about doctors and patients, the details were lost on Khan. But when Jim smiled, Khan mirrored the expression and smiled too. He understood some things, but others were still lost on him, but that did not stop him from enjoying the company. It was good for his brain to hear a natural conversation, as it would help him improve speaking, when he was ready.

“How are you doing, Khan?” Jim asked, trying to draw out his friend a little, even though he could not converse as easily as the others.

“Yes, Khan, do tell us,” Bones said. “From experience, I know that traveling with Jim is not an easy time. Danger around every corner and disease everywhere else.”

"Khan, good. Thank you." Khan said, not speaking up as much during the meal because he did not have the words to meaningfully contribute to the conversation. "Jim, Khan, travel long ... from far. Khan learn, English. Jim learn, Khan words." Khan said trying to express himself the best he could. "Difficult days. Good days."

Bones snorted and said, “Even the good days are difficult when Jim is leading an expedition.”

“Hey!” Jim protested, but did shrug and said, “I guess I did pretty much drag Khan through the jungle. I’m just lucky he trusted me from the beginning and followed me without a struggle.” He reached out and lightly squeeze Khan’s nearest shoulder in affection. “I hope you’ll keep traveling with me, Khan. I haven’t had a real travel companion since Bones settled down.”

"Khan go, Jim go." Khan said, having no intention or thought of going anywhere without Jim. Even if he knew the language, Khan knew he did not fit into the modern world. Staying with Jim was the only future he considered for himself. Now, if Jim wanted him, that was another question. After they reached Jim's home, would Jim want to leave him there? Or would he still travel with his friend? These were questions Khan could not yet ask, but they weighed on his mind.

“Good,” Jim said, “because I’ve already gotten used to having your company, Khan. There’s a lot I want to show you, too. After we see my home, not that it’s much to look at.”

“Endless rows of cornfields,” Bones teased, though he was rather fond of the Kirk homestead, especially the fine farmhouse built a generation earlier, by Jim’s grandfather.

“Well, we do have a lot of corn. It’s good feed for man and beast. We let Sam and his family take care of the farm, while the rest of us get to be archaeologists. We’re just lucky he’s happy to continue the family farm, since neither mom or I are any good at it.”

"Hm." Corn and cornfield was a new word to Khan. Though he understood it had something to do with the farm. As he even understood the concept of endless, as expressed in mathematical terms, as Jim and Khan explained zero and infinite to each other. But infinite corn? What was that? "What is-corn?" He asked.

“Is there any corn here to show Khan?” Jim asked Christine and Bones. “Khan has never seen any. Even a picture will do. I don’t think Khan has ever seen anything that looks like corn.” He turned back to Khan and said, “Corn is an edible plant. Well, the cob part of the plant is good. They grow in an ear ... yeah, I need help.” He looked to his friends for assistance.

"I believe I overheard you explain once before, English was confusing." Christine said as she pushed back her chair and excused herself from the table. She disappeared into the kitchen for a few minutes before she returned with a single ear of corn. "This is corn, Khan." She said, handing it to Khan to examine for himself. "You tear away the outer husk, and eat the kernels."
"Corn." Khan repeated back and examined the vegetable, pulling away at the shell and hairs to see the golden yellow kernels inside. He had never seen anything like it, nothing he knew, grew to look like this.

“So, yes, corn,” Jim said, pointing to the vegetable in Khan’s hand. “And because English is weird, we have names for all the parts. The whole thing is called an ear. Each individual yellow bit is called a kernel. That’s the part we eat, but only cooked. It’s too hard raw. So, don’t chew on this one, right?” He winked at Khan. “You can eat it boiled or creamed or as a bread, in lots of ways. May we take some on the road with us, so I can fix it for Khan?” He looked up at Christine with a hopeful smile.

"Of course, Jim." Christine said as she took her seat. "We can load you up with a sack of proper food supplies, including corn for your trip." She said, feeling that if she actually provided healthy food for them, then Jim would have no choice but to eat it.

"Corn. Kernel. No smell." He said with a shake of his head a little confused. All the other vegetables and roots he had ever encountered before had some sort of scent to them, but not corn. Corn smelled like ... nothing.

“Yeah, I guess it doesn’t really …” Jim said and leaned in for a sniff himself. “Only mild, anyway. Not when it’s cooked either. But it’s really good. You’ll see. So, my family grows this as our main crop. We have a lot of other crops, too, but this grows best and is of value for sale. I’ll show you all of them when we get there. Our whole farm. I promise.”

"Good. Jim, Khan go, Jim farm. Good. See, Jim home." Khan said and placed the corn on the table next to his plate so that he could finish his meal.

Jim enjoyed how matter of fact Khan was about everything, not at all put off by his abruptness. Instead, he found Khan’s manner charming and accepted it along with the rest of the man. He picked up the corn and handed it back to Christine. “Thank you, Christine. I never could have explained without this. It wouldn’t have made any sense.”

“So, a normal conversation with you, then,” Bones teased, his whole manner warm despite the words.

"Yes, I suppose we take some things for granted. Foods or animals native to America." Christine took the piece of corn and headed back to the kitchen. "Where did you say Khan was from, again?”

Jim glanced at Khan and then back at Christine. “He joined me in India,” he said. “He is a special man. He’s amazing, learning our language and customs on the fly. And willing to accept a lot of things that are completely different from what he’s ever seen before. Including you two. You’re pretty special here, too.” His eyes went to Bones.

As Christine came back from the kitchen this time, she brought the pie that had been kept warm in the oven. "You are fortunate to have found a companion, willing to go with you without any ties to family or his home in India." Christine said and set the pie down on the table, then began to clear away the main meal of their lunch.

"Khan, learn." Khan said, understanding that Jim was talking about teaching him things, and introducing him to this new world.

“I’ve got a few books that might help you teach him even more, Jim. Some of the school readers Jocelyn didn’t take with her,” Bones said.
“Oh, hey, that’s nice of you, Bones,” Jim said, knowing how much any reminder of his daughter meant to him. He turned to Khan and said, “Bones has books for Khan. To help learn.” He was determined to become Khan’s family, or the next best thing, since if Khan had family, they were long dead.

"Thank you, Bones.” Khan said with a smile. "Khan learn, books. Good," he said, very interested in this prospect. Repeating back the words was one thing, but being able to identify their written form and characters would be different.

“I’ve written some stuff down for Khan, but I can’t believe I never thought of using some of the learning books from school,” Jim said. “Bones, you’re brilliant.”

The doctor just rolled his eyes at his friend and said, “I’ll even give you an old slate board and some chalk to work with. You can practice the alphabet together. And your handwriting, Jim.”

Jim just made a face at Bones and turned his attention to the pie, which had been sorely neglected. “Oh, this looks even better than usual. Is this rhubarb, Christine? A special rhubarb pie?

"Yes, rhubarb." Christine said with a smile as she wielded the knife to cut it into sections. "A special treat for you Jim, I hope you enjoy." She said, cutting pieces for the guests first, before herself and the Doctor.

“This is rhubarb, Khan,” Jim said. “You eat the stalks of the plant, which is a leafy green that grows low to the ground. The leaves are actually bad for people. Poison. Bad. But the stalks are tart ... uh, taste good. They make lovely pies and tarts. Uh, more bad English. I will show Khan a tart. But this is rhubarb pie. The best!” He cut a small piece and closed his eyes as it touched his tongue and unleashed the lovely flavors.

Khan however hesitated, looking to McCoy and Christine. "Poison pie? Best? Khan ... help?” he asked, asking the other two for assistance in clarifying what this was.

"The pie is good, Khan." Christine said with patience, "We can eat this. It is not poisoned. The pie is good." She said and tried to prove this by eating by example.


"Hm.” Khan looked to Christine, then to Jim, who had already taken a bite. So he accepted this offering and tried a bit from Jim's slice. "Sweet! Good!” Khan said immediately, giving Jim his fork back in favor of picking up his own to eat the piece that Christine had given him.

Bones chuckled and said to Christine, “Another conquest made by your pie. Well done.”

Jim also beamed at the response and said, “See, he also has good taste.” But that was the last thing he said upon getting to the serious business of eating his piece of pie. He already planned to have a second piece not long after the first. After all, rhubarb pie from Christine came around only once or twice a year.

"More wine, gentlemen?” Christine offered, "Otherwise, I have the kettle on for tea or coffee."

"Coffee, please!” Khan knew that word and was enthusiastic about it, feeling that if Christine knew how to make such good food, she surely knew how to make coffee right, too.

“Khan takes his black as his hair,” Jim said. “He once tried some of mine and nearly spit it on me.
And coffee for me, as well, Christine. I’m good on wine, thank you. Want anymore wine, Khan?”

“Man after my own heart, coffee-wise,” Bones said. “I’ll take the same, please, Christine.” He stood to help clear off the dishes, though he was not quite done with his own pie. “I’ll help with the coffee.”

"Thank you, Doctor.” Christine said, leaving her pie untouched until after the guests were taken care of. She cleared the plates into the kitchen and set out cups for the coffee.

Bones carried all of the plates from the main course and went into the kitchen to prepare the coffee beans. He also set out the wash basin for taking care of the dishes later.

As their hosts bustled around, Jim turned to Khan and lightly touched his hands to his companion’s. “How are you, Khan?”

Khan turned his attention to Jim and smiled easily. "Yes, good. Khan, good. Jim, happy friends. Good friends," Khan said, feeling at ease about the afternoon and the company.

“Yes, they are good friends,” Jim said with a glance toward the kitchen. “Jim met Bones a long time ago. Bones help Jim when Jim hurt. Not Marcus hurt. Other hurt.” He wondered if he’d ever be able to explain some of the more sordid details of his life to the other man. “Khan want more pie?”

"Jim, no hurt now. Jim, good. Jim, safe." Khan said and touched his hand to Jim's forearm. "Coffee, pie. Together," He said, wanting to have them at the same time.

“Well, you can always have your whole second piece of pie with coffee,” Jim said with a grin and dropped a hand to rest over Khan’s. “You’re a good friend, Khan. Jim is safe with you. No hurt.”

Bones peered in and said, “Coffee in a minute. You two should finish your first piece of pie. The seconds are right there.” He ducked back into the kitchen.

"Yes." Khan said, his tone calm but his eyes sharp on Jim. "Jim safe, with Khan."

“I’m sorry we have to move on tomorrow,” Jim said softly. “I think you’d be happy here, living with Bones and Christine. You’d learn a lot with them. But we can’t risk it.” He sighed and turned back as Bones emerged with their coffees. “Thanks, Bones. Doctored one here please.”

Bones wrinkled his nose at the pun, but set the white coffee in front of Jim and the black in front of Khan. “See what you think of the coffee we make here, Khan. Certain to be better than Jim’s efforts.”

"Thank you, Bones, coffee." Khan said with a smile and reached for the cup. It was still too hard to drink, but he gave it a sniff. At least it wasn't ruined with sugar. Setting it back down, Khan now accepted the second piece of pie.

Jim picked up his coffee and took a deep slurp of the beverage, heedless of the heat. He fried his tongue, but even that did not deter him from helping himself to his first bite of the second piece of pie. This piece practically melted on his tongue, which hurt in all the best ways. “You sure know how to spoil a guest.” Yeah, he was already regretting that they were going to have to leave in the morning.
Chapter 10

The trails home were achingly familiar to Jim, and each one seemed to greet him like a long-lost friend, even the back ones that Jim favored to both cut their time and to avoid any unwanted pursuit (or outlaws) on the way. He tried to introduce Khan to as much of the land as he could, naming trees and animals and landmarks and everything else they saw. But he still felt like he was cheating Khan out of so much more, since their pace was hurried, with no time to stop and enjoy the scenery along the way.

So, as they reached the border with Iowa, Jim decided that they could finally take a few hours and enjoy some of the natural wonder of his home. And not just any natural wonder, but the physical border of his state- the Mississippi River.

He gently reined in *Sunrise* at the first sight of the flowing waters, wide and deep and blue, with green vegetation along every inch, including the islands that bisected the mighty river. Pointing toward the waters, he said, “Mississippi River.” He gestured to the land on the other side. “Across river, Jim home.” He looked at Khan and smiled at his friend. “Want to play in river?”

"Big river." Khan marveled, having never seen a river so wide across. Except for perhaps during the monsoon, when the river banks overload and became a giant flood plain, but that was not the same thing. This had all the rich deep blue and green colors of a healthy, active river. "Horses, rest, drink. Khan and Jim, drink, wash, play in river. Yes." Khan said, expressing a little more of his vocabulary, now using the term 'and' when there was more then one person or concept in a single sentence or phrase.

Sliding off *Sunset*'s back, Khan rubbed his shoulder in praise for a safe ride. "How, Jim and Khan and horses, go land, to river, to land?" He asked, wondering how they would cross it.

“There’s a ford that’s not that bad a few miles down,” Jim said with a gesture in that direction. “We’ll go that way after we drink, wash and play. For now …” He hopped down and steered his horses through the trees and down the slope toward the water. The approach was not bad here, a slow incline down, where in other places there were steep hillsides and even cliffs. “Tomorrow night, Jim home. Khan meet Jim family.”

"Good, Khan happy, meet Jim family." Khan said, following after Jim with his horses. Once they were along the flat shoreline that disappeared under the water, Khan set about removing the packs and saddles from his two horses so that they could enjoy a bit of rest. However, he did secure a long rope between *Sunset* and *Coffee*, so that the two did not wander off from each other, and therefore, not far from where Jim and Khan were.

Jim used more traditional hobbles, but noted Khan’s clever method with a warm smile. He set aside their tack and packs carefully and pointed to the river. “Want to go for a swim? It’s a nice day!” He kicked off his boots and socks and began to remove his hat, vest and shirt, as well. “And the Mississippi isn’t that cold, either. Perfect for a refreshing dip.” He set his clothes aside and reached for his pants, as well.

"Yes, swim." Khan said as he started to take off his boots and socks. Riding in the sun and across country made for some gritty days, leaving Khan wishing he still had access to a hot water bath. But a free flowing river would be quite satisfying. "Thank you for the gift of water, as is it a gift of life." Khan said, half undressed and kneeling on the shore as he dipped his hand in to grab a handful of water to drink first. Satisfying his thirst, Khan then finished removing the rest of his clothes and waded into the water.
Jim caught a lot of what Khan just said and felt a bit amazed by how much reverence he had for every part of the world. It made him feel inadequate somehow, like he didn’t show enough respect for nature. With a little nod toward the sky and his friend, he splashed into the water after Khan and when it was deep enough, dove right in. He had been taught to swim by his mother, who had thought it an important skill for everyone to learn, especially given some of the places they went. But Jim preferred to swim for fun than for his life, though he’d done that a few times, too.

He popped his head up above the liquid near Khan and said, “Come swim with me, Khan! The water’s awesome!”

"Yes, yes-“ Khan smiled at Jim and then dove under the surface, to cool off his entire body. The water was quite refreshing, so he allowed himself to be swept along a little before swimming back to Jim. "River is good. Nice day. Happy.” He said, reaching back to wash the back of his neck.

Jim floated on his back and drifted a little in the river’s light current, glad for the pool that kept them out of the main flow. He kicked with his feet and headed for his companion, reaching out for Khan. “Play with Jim? Please.” He rolled over and dove beneath the surface again, playfully smacking his nearest leg.

Khan watched Jim with a smile, "Yes, Khan play." He agreed and dove under the water as well, swimming around Jim's legs and gave a firm yank to his ankle. He swam around Jim and did this a few more times, pulling Jim back down quickly, but also releasing him just as fast.

Jim yelped as he broke for air the last time and swam back toward shore, before turning around to dive and try and find Khan. He saw the other man swimming as easily as a fish underwater and approached him as rapidly as possible. He knew he could never outdo Khan on land or water, but it was still fun to grapple and play.

This time however instead of yanking at Jim's feet, Khan grabbed his friend by the ankles and launched him up out of the water. When he surfaced, he smiled and laughed, watching as Jim was thrown up above the surface a few feet, then splashed down again. "Fun, Jim?" He asked, making sure this was the sort of play his friend wanted.

Jim splashed back into the water with cry of delight, before emerging with another whoop. “Again! Please! That was amazing! I always forget how strong you really are. Please, Khan, make me fly again!” He swam back toward his friend at full speed, hoping to be tossed in the air again. That had been one of the best sensations of his life.

"Yes, Jim." Khan smiled. He interlocked his fingers under the water in the form of a basket, "Feet" He said, giving Jim a place to put his foot, then launched him into the air again, tossing him a few feet away before he came down with another large splash.

Jim made a loud whoop as he flew through the air and splashed into the water gracefully, ending up deep under the water. He kicked himself back up to the top and headed for Khan again, delight in his expression. “Can you leap out of the water, Khan? You should feel the same excitement.”

"Hm.” Khan considered and then allowed himself to sink straight down until his feet touched the bottom. Then pushing off the bottom, Khan leapt out of the water, much like a dolphin, as the then crashed back into the water on his side and laughed, knowing his splash had soaked Jim. "Good?"

Jim made a little noise that managed to combine amazement, delight and sheer envy in one, laughing as the splash engulfed him. And in playful retaliation, he threw as much water as possible toward his friend. “I wish I could do that!” He ducked back under the water to avoid any splashing in his direction.
Khan smiled again and watched Jim swim around. He waded in the water a bit, enjoying the cool water and the sun on his face. He purred softly, relaxed. "Jim- Jim, play ..." He encouraged, taking some water into his mouth, then spitting it in an arch like a fountain. "Jim, Jim ... surprise." He said and allowed himself to disappear under the water.

“Surprise?” Jim asked and looked around himself warily, expecting Khan to do something like pop up next to him or throw him way in the air or drag him under again. He swam a little further out into the river, trying to catch a glimpse of his friend before he was ‘surprised.’ “Come out, come out, wherever you are!”

The river water was still for a considerable time, except for an odd bird trying to skim the surface for a bug or small fish. Then from under Jim came the surprise. Not pulling Jim down, or launching him out of the water, instead, rising up between his legs. Large and wide, like the body of a horse. But not a horse. A lion surfaced from under Jim, chuffing at the water around his mouth to blow it away as he swam forward, Jim now on his back.

Jim let out a loud yell as his friend emerged beneath him, but not as anticipated at all. “Surprise!” he yelped, eyes huge as he found himself straddling a mighty lion. “Khan.” He suddenly found himself laughing in delight and throwing his arms around the strong neck and petting the mane. “Khan!” He stroked through the mane and lightly tugged. “Take me for a ride, Khan?” he asked, completely unafraid somehow.

As a big cat, Khan was not designed for swimming. Much of his black mane was weighed down in the water, but still the lion kicked out with all four paws, swimming through the water until they got closer to shore. And as he pulled himself out of the water, with Jim safely on his back, Khan gave a shake of his head, sending droplets of water in every direction.

Jim laughed as Khan shook his head out and promptly spilled off his back and on to the ground. He stared up at the magnificent lion now standing beside him and breathed, “The Lion of the Desert.” And completely out of instinct, he crooned, “Who’s a big, ferocious lion? You are!” He rolled to his knees and reached out the stroke Khan’s fur, fascinated by the soft, silky feel and strong muscles underneath. “This is incredible. Who’s an incredible lion!? You are!” And then he laughed and gave Khan a huge hug, as much as he could wrap his arms around the lion’s neck anyway.

Khan purred deeply, though part of it almost sounded like a laugh. And so as Jim hugged his neck and thick mane, Khan rolled his head to the side to rub his cheek against his friend. He basked in the attention, then took a single step forward, which was enough to push Jim onto his backside. But this was not prey. Jim was his friend. His wet friend. And like any good big cat, Khan started to lick Jim's wet hair, cleaning him up.

Jim landed on his ass with an undignified squawk and lifted a hand to stroke the cat’s face. He laughed at the feel of a big, wet, rough tongue along his scalp and forehead. “Khan. Khan! You’re just making me even wetter. And that tickles.” He found himself laughing helplessly at the tickling sensation along his scalp, even as he clung to the big cat. He wasn’t afraid at all of the lion, trusting Khan implicitly, even in this form.

Khan paused in his efforts, regarded Jim for a moment, then finished up with Jim's hair, licking him a few more times before he truly stopped. Shifting his weight to his right side, Khan then allowed his hip, followed by his shoulder, to drop down into the sandy bank, laying out next to Jim with a low purr.

“Big, lazy kitty!” Jim declared as Khan flopped out beside him. He moved to stroke the exposed side and flank, ruffling the wet fur. His hands were energetic at hitting all of the fur on the lion, which he made sure to stand on end as much as he could, grinning to himself. “Pretty kitty. Such a
pretty kitty.”

Never one to say no to the attention, Khan rolled over onto his back, completely surrendering to Jim's hands and petting. His large paws flopped over at the wrist, while his tail flicked back and forth in the sand, keeping him from completely rolling over one way or the other.

Jim laughed in delight at the way Khan rolled on his back and gave him belly. He obeyed the implicit command and began to rub the soft belly of the lion. And giving in to his own desire, he dropped his face right into the wet fur and rubbed his cheeks (both of them) all over. “I can’t believe I’m getting to do this. What a good kitty.”

This time, the rumble in Khan's chest was much deeper. Tipping his head back, Khan purred and basked in the sun, loving how Jim rubbed against him. And like the big cat he was, when he stretched out his back legs and yawned to show his relaxed state, the yawn turned into a friendly roar, easily filling the air and silencing all other wildlife.

Sitting up a little, Jim looked over the lion from head to tail, noting his dimensions. He seemed large, even for a lion, but he’d never really seen one this close up. Still, he wouldn’t be surprised if his friend’s version of a lion wasn’t even more impressive than a ‘normal’ lion. He watched the tail flip and twitch, until he couldn’t help himself, and daring as ever, he reached out and tugged.

Rolling over onto his side, Khan lifted his head to look at Jim. He was hardly angry with him, in fact, the lion seemed to regard Jim as a cub, biting at his tail, something to be tolerated, instead of angered by. So sitting in this position, he purposefully flipped his tail again, teasing Jim with it.

And Jim didn’t even pretend to do anything else, he grabbed for the flicking tail and managed to catch it with both hands. And now, he tugged a little more at the appendage, definitely playful. He made a little growling noise himself as he pulled at the hairy end. “Play with Jim, big kitty! Come on!” He lightly yanked again, making sure never to cause any pain in the process.

With a huff, Khan got up onto all fours, pulling his tail away from Jim's hands. He turned in place and swatted at Jim's ankles, large paws touching the skin, but claws completely sheathed.

Jim snickered at the light tap, which he could tell was all play. And in the same vein, he propped himself on his feet, legs bent at the knees and pounced.

Pretending that Jim was the more fierce predator, Khan rolled back with the play-attack. The large lion fell back, but had a paw draped heavily against Jim's back, holding him to his chest. As a lion, Khan was very careful while he fake wrestled his human friend, before pinning Jim down on the ground and promptly laying his large head on Jim's chest, trapping him.

Jim mock-wrestled with the lion, growling in a ridiculous fashion the whole time, as if he were some sort of threat to the large predator. But when he found himself on his back with Khan’s head flopped on his chest, he stopped moving with a little giggle at the weight. But his hands found their way into shaggy mane and tugged a few times, before petting again. “You win. Such a big kitty.”

Pleased by this, Khan rubbed his very large head against Jim, half smothering his face with the thick black lion mane. And even though his friend was laying right there, Khan called out to him with a few short, light roars, before settling once more. With one paw on Jim's chest, the lion began to lightly close his eyes, showing that he was relaxed and happy.

Laughing at the way Khan got hair all over his face and into his nose, Jim pushed at his head playfully. “Khan! Tickles!” He sneezed a few times when his friend moved his head and settled back, still giggling. Filling his lungs, he attempted a few roars himself to answer the calls Khan
made. And that just made him laugh more, delighted by the entire encounter. “You’re a good lion ... just like you’re a good man.”

Khan's ears flicked forward as Jim attempted to roar. He stared at his friend for a long time, then decided to show him how it was really done. Khan filled his large chest with air, then called out a few proper roars. The last one faded softly as Khan lowered his head to rest on his side, soaking up the afternoon sun, which was already drying out his fur. But as he laid there, relaxed, the lion began to fade back into a man, resting on the ground next to his friend with a blissful smile.

Jim laughed and clung as Khan roared in his ears, but looked a little sad when Khan turned back into a man again. Although that quickly turned again into a grin, and he rolled toward Khan to give him a hug. “Thank you for showing me that, Khan. You make a handsome lion. Can you change like that whenever you want? Can you become more than a lion?”

"Yes, Khan change, lion." Khan said, still maintaining a happy purr. "Khan change ... big dog." He said, since he did not know the English word for wolf, as it was not something that had come up before. "Jim, surprised?" He asked hopefully.

“Jim is very surprised,” Jim agreed with a huge grin and another hug. “Khan makes Jim very happy. Plays nicely with Jim. But ... Khan cannot show others unless you ask Jim first if it safe.” He looked very serious now. “Khan is special. Only Khan can become lion. Become big dog. No other people. Please, Khan. Understand?”

"Khan, understand. Jim see, lion. Jim see, big dog. Understand." No one else was to see him transform, which was fair to his mind, since it was usually something only done during specific solar or lunar cycles and ceremonies. Or when Khan simply wanted to walk into the desert and be left alone as a lion for a time. But that too had been a rare occurrence.

“Thank you, Khan,” Jim said with a warm smile. “I just want to make sure Khan is safe. Hopefully you can show my family, if you want.” He flopped back out on the shore with a little groan, before slowly sitting up. “I think I laid on every rock possible.” He stretched a bit to the sky and then reached down to lightly stroke his hair, stroking through the long locks.

"Khan, understand. Khan, safe. Jim, safe." He said with a smile as he looked up at Jim. "Jim, good friend. Jim, best friend. Khan, happy." He said, quite prepared to have a little cat-nap here in the sun, but suspected that Jim would not let them stay for long enough to do so.

“Jim happy. Khan make Jim happy. Khan so good for Jim. Jim lucky.” Jim lightly pressed a kiss to his friend’s forehead, knowing the man didn’t mind. “You look a bit sleepy. Let me get you something to put your head on so you’ll at least have a little comfort. Men aren’t meant to sleep on the shore, even if lions are.” He rose to fetch one of their packs which carried their bedding. The idea of a nap in the sun appealed to him, as well.

"Khan, happy. Sun, good." Khan said, trying to explain that he was not necessarily tired, but being lazy and closing his eyes for a bit did appeal to him. "Jim, Khan, together?" He asked, laying on his side to watch his friend.

“Together nap?” Jim asked, setting out a bed roll they could lie on and a couple of softer rags on which to lay their heads. “Khan want Jim, Khan together?” He patted the material and tugged lightly at Khan’s side to encourage him to roll on top of it. “Here please.”

"Together, nap. Good." Khan obeyed Jim’s instruction, moving onto the bedding, after dusting off some of the sand from his body so that he did not bring it to bed.
“My thoughts exactly. Together, nap, good.” Jim brushed himself off a little and stretched out on the bedroll, scooting about until he found a comfortable position. “Khan good?” he asked, once he settled. The roll could just hold the two of them with a bit to spare, so he wanted to make sure he had not edged Khan off the side.

"Yes. Khan, happy." Khan said as he lightly closed his eyes, enjoying the warm sun against his face after playing in the water with Jim. He reached out blindly until he found Jim's arm, which he held onto, as if to make sure Jim did not disappear on him while he rested.

“I'm here,” Jim murmured in response to the sudden hold and shifted back a little to press even closer to his friend. “Nap, Khan. Jim will watch.” Indeed, even though he basked in the sunlight, he still kept his eyes open for any dangers. There was no end of trouble an unalert traveler might find himself in.

With a deep yawn that echoed his lion side, Khan settled in, making a few soft noises as his brain drifted off to sleep. Transforming often left his body and mind feeling deeply relaxed and at ease. He was happy to be laying next to Jim, knowing he was close at hand, having enjoyed some time laughing and playing together. So he indulged in a light cat nap, conserving his energy for another time.
Chapter 11

Jim urged the tired *Sunrise* down the last half-mile of road, eyes peeled for that first glimpse of the Kirk family homestead, the strong farmhouse built to stand against the blast of the frigid winters that blew through Iowa. There had been many times when Jim couldn’t wait to see the back of the place (and would be again), but for now, he felt nothing but triumph for having safely transported his friend into the security of his family’s home and arms. No Marcus would dare try to breach this place again, not after what Winona had done to Alexander Marcus the only time he’d tried.

“Home, Khan,” he said as their horses trotted down the dirt path and the house was suddenly right there, warm and beckoning in the late afternoon sun. “Jim home. Now, Khan home, too. Come on.” He could not help himself, but brought his horses to a fast lope, wanting to be there now.

Khan sat back and took in the sight of the family farm. Land for as far as he could see, and in the center of it all, the homestead, Jim's home. "Jim, home. Very, very good." He said and gave a small click of his tongue to *Sunset* to chase after Jim.

Seeing the dust the horses kicked up from down the road, a woman in pants, holding a shotgun, came out onto the front porch. But as soon as she recognized the manic laughter of her son rushing down to the house, she removed the shells from the gun and set it aside.

Christopher Pike had been buried in his study when he heard the sound of hoofbeats. Per Winona’s cautious nature, he grabbed his own gun on his way to the door, but set it aside quickly as soon as he knew who the head rider was. “Jim!” he yelled as he burst out the door and down the steps.

“Chris!” Jim yelled and performed an emergency dismount, jumping off his mare before she came to a stop and raced toward the older man. He embraced him without any shame. “Chris! How are you?” He pounded the older man’s back emphatically and turned to look for his mother.

"You are back early." Winona said, coming down from the porch to greet her son. "Its good to see you, looking well." She said, putting a hand on Christopher's shoulder before moving in to unnecessarily fidget with Jim's shirt.

Khan asked the horses to a gentle stop compared to Jim, dismounting, but keeping close to *Sunset* until he was welcomed and invited closer.

“Mom,” Jim said, barely restraining an eyeroll. He stepped forward and gave her a quick hug. “It’s good to see you. I have so much to tell you!” He turned and gestured Khan to come forward. “But first, I want to introduce you to someone. Chris, Mom, this is Khan Noonien Singh, the Lion of the Desert. Khan, this is my mom, Winona, and my good friend, Christopher Pike. Call him Chris.”

Khan moved forward once he had been invited and smiled to show he was happy to meet them. "Hello. Jim, mother. Why-Nona." He said, holding his wrists together to offer a small prayer in greeting, honored to meet Jim's mother. "Hello, Christopher Pike. Chris."

Chris noted the gesture and the unusual rhythm of the new man’s words and said, “Welcome to the Kirk family homestead, Khan. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” He extended a hand to Khan, wondering if he knew the greeting.

Jim nodded to Khan encouragingly, since he had shown the man a handshake before. He looked back at his mother, hoping she would welcome Khan with the same cordialness.

Handshakes were still strange to Khan, but after offering Chris a small prayer of greeting, he then

"Hello, Khan. You have been traveling with my son long?" Winona asked, a bit surprised that Jim would bring someone home. Her son still had urges and flings of course, which she never gave a second thought to, but he hadn't brought home anyone since Carol Marcus, and doubted he ever would again.

"Khan, travel with Jim, yes." Khan said, not entirely understanding that the question had been about length of time.

“I brought him back with me from India,” Jim said. “I found him there.” And he placed a strange emphasis on the word *found*. “I’ve brought back everything I could save from the Marcus’ party before they got there. Let me give everything to you to take inside, while Khan and I take care of our horses and the rest of the tack and travel gear. Take a look at it all while we do that.” He scurried back to the two pack horses and carefully removed the artifacts from their packs, bringing them to Chris and his mother. He only left the lion mask, which he wanted Khan to bring with them when they came inside.

"I am looking forward to it." Winona said, curious about Jim’s companion and the items he managed to salvage. "I’ll set out the lemonade, when you are done with the horses." She said, reaching out to pat her hand against the side of Jim’s face, happy to see him, then headed inside, already opening up the bag to see what Jim brought home with him this time.

Chris also took one of the packs and said, “We’ll get word to your brother that you’re home, too, if you like.”

“Thank you, Chris,” Jim said. “Let him know I’ll be over to see him and the family tomorrow. Special hugs for Aurelan and the kids.” He lightly took Khan’s right hand. “Let’s take care of the horses, Khan. Than we’ll go inside the house.” He gave a gentle tug and then let go to fetch his horses and lead them toward the stables. They did not keep many horses, so Jim knew there would be plenty of room.

"What do you think of this? " Khan began to ask Sunset, keeping a hand on his neck as they headed to the stables. "This could be your home. After all that you've seen, how far you have traveled, this can be your home. Did you see all that green? Did you like it? " Khan led Sunset in and tied him off so that he could start removing his saddle and brush him down. "You have come a long way, and you still have your friends with you. That is good, I think." He said, giving him friendly scratches before moving on to take care of Coffee.

Jim smiled at the warm way Khan talked to the horses, even as he untacked Sunrise and carried her tack to set on a sawhorse outside the tack room. “Khan, tack here,” he said, patting an empty sawhorse next to the one he’d just put Sunrise’s tack on. He also removed the packs and set that aside to go through. He took care of the horses’ needs first, grooming them to a gleam, before he led them to their new stalls. As he went by some other empty ones, he gestured for Khan. “Coffee. Sunset.”

Once he got water and forage for all of the stalls, he headed to their packs and sorted all of the items, leaving some in the stables, but taking all foods and clothes. He also fetched Khan’s mask and carried it to him. “Khan mask.”

Khan introduced Sunset and Coffee to their stalls, walking around with him and talking to him before closing them in. "My good friends. I want you to be happy here." He said, giving them each his attention before helping to hang up some of the tack. "Yes, Khan mask. Thank you." Khan said, holding it close to his side. "Go to, Jim family?"
Jim held up their other items and said, “Yes. Jim wants to tell Khan's story. See if mom knows Khan. Khan okay with Jim tell mom?” He did not want to do anything that might upset his friend, even though he did not think that his companion would object. But he did not want to assume anything in this case. “Mom and Chris help Jim and Khan.”

Comfortable and trusting of Jim's judgement since their first encounter, Khan simply smiled. "Yes, tell story. Jim, Khan, story, good." They had a good story and good adventures, and Jim's family should easily be entrusted with them. "Good, family."

“Let’s go talk then,” Jim said and headed back for the house. “Khan want eat or drink?” he asked as they climbed the back stairs. He let them in the door and set aside their supplies for later, not wanting to wait to talk to his mother and Chris. They would undoubtedly be in the study, where they could spread out the artifacts and had access to all of their books and documents. With a brief knock on the door, he entered with Khan and asked, “So, what do you think?” as he noted his mother and Chris examining his finds.

"These are lovely finds, Jim." Winona said, not getting herself upset by the fact that there likely had been hundreds of others Jim probably had been forced to leave behind. "I know this symbol. I never thought I would see it again-" She said, indicating to one of the pieces. "These are beautifully maintained bronze-age artifacts. Tell me about where you found them."

So, Jim took a seat and gestured for Khan to sit beside him, before launching into a description of the temple and the entrance. He described the lovely artwork inside, which had led him to the grand, middle chamber, where he’d carefully collected all of the artifacts now spread on the table. From his marvelous memory, he sketched out every detail he could remember, which he’d also noted down in his journal, as well. He also discussed how they’d gotten the lion mask Khan now carried, gesturing to the item in his companion’s hands.

And then he paused (at least partially for melodramatic effect) and said, “But none of those are the most important or valuable item I located in the temple.” He shook his head from side to side. “Because at the center of the temple was ... Khan.”

Sitting next to his friend, Khan kept the lion mask on his lap, though watched as Chris and Winona handled the artifacts that Jim had brought along. He wanted to tell them about some of the items, but was not sure how.

Winona picked up her head and looked at Jim, then smiled at Khan politely. At first she understood the comment as suggesting that Khan was the most important find of his life, that Jim had somehow allowed himself to fall in love again. But something about it did not sit quite right with her. "What do you mean, Khan was at the center of the temple?" She asked.

“I mean that he’s Khan Noonien Singh, the Lion of the Desert, who was buried in the temple over a thousand years ago,” Jim said softly. “And before you think I’ve gone crazy, he can prove it to you.” He turned to Khan and said, “Please, tell them about you.”

Chris glanced over at Winona, not at all sure what to make of that announcement. He’d been worried enough when, like her, he’d assumed Jim had fallen in love again. The first time round have nearly killed them all.

"Khan Noonien Singh." Khan said, placing a hand to his own chest. "The Lion of the Desert." He said, doing his best to express himself, even though Jim was more familiar with his use of language. "Khan talk, gods. Gods, talk Khan. Khan talk, man and woman." He said, then pulled out his own notebook, showing the sketches he had made for Jim over a month ago when trying to explain these things to him.
Winona stared hard at Khan. "Say that again? Say ... Lion?" She repeated back the word in his language, recognizing it almost instantly from her studies.

"Khan. Lion of the Desert. Yes, me."

"Khan can do incredible things," Jim said with an excited bounce in place. "I’ve seen him more than once. And he’s taught me some of his language. And attempted to include me in some of his ceremonies. He’s more than just a man." He turned to Khan and asked, "Will you please show mom and Chris, lion?"

Khan looked to Jim, just to be certain. "Khan, secret? Secret, lion?" He asked Jim as he stood. He waited for Jim to answer, but first presented the masked to Winona. "Mask. Nahkmet." He then lifted it to cover his face, "Nahkmet-Khan." He attempted to explain, though he was not sure what the couple understood through their silence.

Chris said, "I’ve heard that name before ... Nahkmet. You’ve done research on her, haven’t you?"

Jim noted the interest of the senior members of his family and said, "Yes, please, Khan, secret lion. My mother and Chris need to see what you can do and who you really are."

"Yes, I have." Winona said, slowly sitting down in a chair as she held the gold mask in her hands that Khan had offered her. "Nahkmet is the lion goddess of the sun. She-" All words left her brain as she watched Khan remove his shirt and suddenly sink down to the ground. But before his hands touched the floor, his body had transformed into something her brain could not explain. "There is a lion in the study." She said almost numbly.

Jim made a low noise of delight and hopped off his seat to kneel by the lion and rub through his mane with playful hands. "Khan lion! Such a big boy! Such a pretty kitty!"

"Jim! For God’s sake, what are you doing?" Chris demanded, frozen in his seat with worry. He wanted to go for his gun, but didn’t dare move too quickly, lest their unanticipated guest got spooked and injured Jim.

Khan however purred at the scratches Jim gave him and gave a deep bow of his front legs and chest. He could sense the fear from the others in the room, so decided to do his best to show that he understood, and would not hurt them. He leaned into Jim, nuzzling his hair, before laying down on his belly so that he did not look too big.

"... Chris?" Winona looked to Chris, as if to be certain she was seeing the same thing he was. "This isn't possible. The stories of Nahkmet and Singrir are mythical, Jim, they're not real ... I ... I don't understand what is happening."

"Yeah, I see him, too," Chris agreed, eyes locked on the large beast, which had now settled on the floor and acted very cozy with the man he looked upon as his own son. "I’m about ready to break out some strong liquor."

"There’s nothing to be afraid of," Jim said with a low laugh. "Not that I wasn’t startled the first time I saw Khan like this.” He scratched behind his ears, which he remembered the barn cats as loving. “But who is Singrir, mom? That sounds a lot like Khan’s name.”

"Singrir is the wolf god, of the moon. The story goes, that Singrir the wolf, and Nahkmet the lion fell in love ... that ... they-" Winona bravely slipped out of her chair to her knees to look at the lion. "The story suggests that they conceived a child on a lunar eclipse, and gave birth on a solar eclipse. But because it was conceived and born on earth, rather then the heavens, the child was left behind on
“He’s not just a demi-God than? Khan’s a full fledged God!? Hear that, big kitty? You’re a God! That’s ... huh-” Jim looked at his mother with wondering eyes. “Does this mean we have to start believing in Gods now, mom?” He continued to lightly play with Khan’s ears, still unafraid of his friend, no matter what he was.

“Yeah, drinks are called for,” Chris said and slowly got up to fetch some brandy and three sifters. “Large ones.”

Khan flicked his ears to watch Chris go, but then leaned heavily into Jim again, purring happily at his constant attention.

"I do not even know, Jim ... I think the story implies that because he was left behind on earth, and he could not live with his parents as gods, that he was a bridge between the gods and mankind ... that made him a demi-god, at the very least. I ... I need that drink, Chris!” Winona said as she got up and put the mask on the table with the other artifacts.

“’I knew he was special when I found him in the temple, mom,” Jim said softly. “I couldn’t leave him there for the Marcuses to get their hands on. He’s too important. There’s so much he can teach us, can tell us, about a civilization long gone.” He impulsively hugged the lion and buried his face in his mane. “That’s why I brought back less than usual ... because of him.” He looked at his mother. “We have to protect him.”

Chris carried in the bottle and three snifters, all full. He carefully handed Winona one and delicately reached out to give Jim one as well. As that was safely taken, he lowered himself to sit next to Jim’s mother, holding his own. “This is the greatest discovery of all time, Winona. Bigger than anything else.”

"Thanks, Chris," Winona said, taking a few quick sips of her drink. "This is insane ..." She said, just staring again. "I have a few stories translated on Nahkmet and Singrir, I mean ... mythology ... but now you want me to believe it is all real?"

“You suggested the mythology, mom,” Jim pointed out, taking a tip of his drink and wheezing out a happy sigh. “I just brought you a man who can turn himself into a lion ... and a big dog. I haven’t seen that yet, though.” He ruffled Khan’s mane contentedly and tugged lightly at his forelock. “He’s my friend. That’s all that matters to me.”

Khan purred and dropped his head into Jim's lap, soaking in the attention.

"How does he do it, then? What has he told you?" Winona asked her son, though as she went to write it down in her notebooks, she realized she was holding a drink, and not her pencil. So she put it on the table and quickly traded it for her pencil and notebook.

“I don’t think he knows how,” Jim said. “He just does it. Just changes at will. I know that he normally does it for ceremonies. At least, that’s how I understood what he told me. He can do a full change, like this, or a partial change. I’ve seen him do both.” He smiled down at the large head now snug in his lap and itched under his chin, testing if that was another area similar between domestic cats and his Khan lion.

“This really is unbelievable,” Chris breathed, having already needed to pour himself a second snifter full.

Khan panted softly, sticking his tongue out a few times as Jim scratched under his chin. With Jim, as
a lion, Khan was far more docile then he was as a human, who could get impatient with others. Plus, the transformation always felt good to him, so he was happy to remain a lion, until Jim asked him to do otherwise.

"You are right." Winona said suddenly. "It would have been a disaster if Marcus got his hands on him ... I am proud that you are the one who found him."

Jim grinned at the way Khan’s tongue would flick out and tried to get him to do it some more, seeking out happy spots under his chin. “I’m just proud that he trusted me enough to follow me all the way home. But, mom, now that we’re here, now that I’ve got your support, I feel horrible about how badly the Marcuses will treat Khan’s temple and all the artifacts.” He lifted his head to look at them both, jaw firm and shoulders squared. “We decided not to fight them on their terms, but this time ... this time I feel like we should. I want to make sure Khan’s stuff is treated right.”

"I understand you, Jim," Winona said with a sigh, rubbing the side of her face as she contemplated what they could do, then looked to Chris. "What do you think?"

“It’s been a long time since we put together a full expedition, especially one that was armed, and to make sure we got there in time to really stop the Marcus’ group ... we’d have to move fast,” Chris said. “But we’ve still got contacts all over the globe, Winona, and if you called in a few favors, I think we could get something together.”

Jim nodded a few times slowly and said, “We’ll have to ask Khan how he feels about it, too. He knows the Marcuses are dangerous, but not really why exactly. We’re not quite up to that level of conversation yet.”

"Recovering every missing artifact and protecting every inch of the temple will be difficult, but worthy and important in preserving the evidence and history related to your friend, Khan.” Winona looked to Chris, then to Jim. "We will give them a fight and get everything back.

Jim tightened his hold on the lion’s mane, gut clenching a little in a mixture of fear, anger and hope, and said, “It’s been too long in coming. I know why we made our choices, but I’m tired of giving up the best part of things to those bastards.” His voice sunk to near a growl by the end, before he lowered his head to press his face into soft fur to try and calm himself a bit.

Hearing in his voice how upset Jim was, Khan turned his head slightly and began to lick Jim's face and neck as a form of comfort. His tongue was rough and strong, but there was clearly affection in the gesture, wanting Jim to be ok.

Jim could not help the soft laughter at the tongue that cleaned his skin and hugged the lion even tighter, eyes closing. “Khan,” he murmured into his neck. “We want to go back to your home. My family, you and friends and drive the Marcuses out of your temple. We want to protect and rescue your things, get them all back. What do you think? Roar once for yes.” He grinned by the end, lifting his head to look into the strong gaze of his friend as a lion.

Khan looked at his friend for a moment, understanding him, but giving the suggestion proper consideration. Jim said that this would be his new home, but now, they were going to go back? All of them? Some of the items in the temple were still very important to him, especially the people and animals that had been buried with him. He wanted to be sure they were treated with respect, and felt Jim would see to it. So he parted his lips and gave a soft roar. It was enough to make the window panes in the house tremble, but not loud or strong enough to make books fall off the shelves, or break household items.

“Motion passed,” Jim said with a nod to his mom and Chris. He lifted his brandy snifter and said,
voice now firm and just this side of malicious, “To downing the Marcuses once and for all.”

“Downing the Marcuses,” Chris agreed with equal fervor, since he had almost been crippled by their actions against the family. He lifted his glass, as well, and turned his eyes to Winona.

"Downing the Marcuses." Winona said, her own face showing a similar anger that her son had inherited.

Jim clinked his glass with his family and drained the brandy, before setting it down firmly. “Will you get everything in motion today, Chris? Mom?” he asked, not wanting the Marcus expedition to have more time with the temple than could be helped. “I’m sure we had some tails, too, but the main Marcuses will still be there, looting.” He tickled his lion’s nose with one finger, trusting his friend not to mind the gentle touch.

"It will take some effort, to track down the items they might have already sold off. But easy enough to clean up and get the collection back, once we do." Winona said. "We can discuss a final plan of action over dinner."

Khan purred, voice warm and happy at the gentle attention and massage over the length of his nose. He knew what the others were discussing, but was quite content to remain just how he was, as he did not have much to offer by way of decision making.

“I’ll start getting word out to our friends and allies,” Chris said. “You know Spock and Uhura will join us. If we plan this right, we can be back on India’s shore in a month. The main problem will be the ship, but if we’re lucky, I can get Captain Sulu to take us. He’s got his own problems with Alexander Marcus.”

Jim nodded and said, “I’ll round up Scotty and Chekov. Can we get the money backing we need, mom?” His hands tenderly worked over his friend’s coat, which calmed his nerves and focused his mind.

"Don't worry Jim. Money will not be the problem." Winona said, feeling that the trip would be comfortably financed without issue. Once they got there, and confronted the Marcuses, that would be the real challenge.

Jim grinned at his mother, who was the fiercest and most determined person he knew. If she said the money wouldn’t be a problem, he could trust her word. “I’ll leave that in your hands,” he said with a nod. “I’ll help Chris with the provisions and outfitting the expedition. We’ll need to prepare for a battle, as well.” He lightly tugged at Khan’s mane and said, “I need to run around for a few minutes. Is the outside clear?”

“There’s nobody around to see your new friend,” Chris said.

“Khan, want to go for a run, big kitty? Come on, kitty!” Jim lightly tugged his ear again and pushed lightly at his head. “Good kitty.”

Pushing himself up off the floor, the lion chuffed softly at Jim, agreeing to keep him company. Truly, he would love the opportunity to run around the farm, after so many days and nights on the road, and so many days enclosed on the ship, being able to run wild for a bit was greatly appealing.

Jim climbed to his feet and trotted toward the door, waving at his mom and Chris. “We’ll be back in an hour or so. I just- I need to get out for a little for myself.”

“We understand, Jim,” Chris said, even as he reached out to put an arm around Winona.
“Thanks,” Jim said with a warm smile for them both and headed for the door to the front porch, holding it open for Khan and following him out and down. As soon as his feet hit the porch, he kicked off his boots and socks, not wanting them to get in his way, and sprinted toward the steps, leaping off the porch and just running down the road, arms and legs working as hard and fast as possible.

On the front porch, Khan gave a deep stretch of his front legs, then his back. But as soon as Jim started to run off, Khan pursued him in a light lope. It felt good to have the fresh air against his face and the sun warm his skin, finding freedom here, Jim's home and family farm.

Jim detoured down a side lane, sticking to the farmlands so that nobody would see them. He stretched his energy to the limit, just needing the release. The hurt of Carol’s betrayal, not to mention the literal injuries to himself and his family, coupled with the continued loss of site after site to their looting, festered inside of him, driving him to sleeping with multiple people without attachment and to endanger his life over and over to do what damage he could to the Marcuses (as well as save historical artifacts from their clutches). But what he’d longed for was a chance to get back at them, to smash their organization and stop them for good. And now, here it was, given to him in the form of a good deed for his new friend and companion.

As he reached the end of his stamina to sprint, he let out a great shout with the rest of his energy and let himself crumple into a ball at the base of a venerable bur oak, curling into a ball.

As human or lion, Khan did not understand why Jim was so upset. He did not understand the pain Jim had been holding onto over the years. But he could see that something was pressing on Jim, and needed relief from. So Khan trotted forward the last few steps to where Jim had collapsed. He immediately placed a heavy paw on his back and began to lick the back of his neck and hair, cleaning away the sweat of his run and wishing to soothe his nerves.

Jim felt the warm breath and rough, wet tongue and huffed a soft laugh through his panted breaths and shivers. He slowly rolled over and reached up to grip Khan’s neck, stroking through the thick mane. “Khan,” he said quietly to the lion. “I’m sorry for being so emotional. You must think me such a pain.” He scratched Khan’s cheeks and chin with contrite hands, eyes shut on his deep feelings. “Shall I tell you about Carol and I, Khan?”

Wanting his friend to feel better, and encouraging him to say what he needed to get off his chest, Khan made a soft sound in his throat, then rubbed his face against Jim. After showing this affection and encouragement, Khan settled on the ground, laying next to Jim on all fours, much like one of the bronze statues in New York.

“She’s still the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen, Khan, and I’ve seen quite a few,” Jim said softly, moving to lay his head on Khan’s paws and checking to make sure he was welcome. “I met her by accident, I thought, at the New York City Library, which houses one of the most complete libraries on ancient civilizations that we always used to research places we were traveling. And there she was one day, this gorgeous blonde woman deeply engrossed in one of the key texts I wanted to look at. I approached her to ask about how long she planned to have the book and discovered she was intelligent, too. I’d never met another woman who loved history and archaeology as much as I do, except my mother. Carol really was perfect for me ... too perfect.” He made a low whimper in the back of his throat.

Listening to his friend, Khan kept his head up, a somewhat protective posture while Jim exposed this vulnerable part of himself. His ears flicked around, picking up small sounds in the distance, but overall remain entirely fixed on Jim. It sounded like a part of Jim was mourning the loss of the perfect partner. And though Khan knew rituals for mourners, this was not quite the same.
“She got close to me so easily, Khan,” Jim remembered softly. “Mom and Chris were so thrilled that I’d met someone who seemed to be such a good match, someone who wanted to go into the field with me and would contribute to our work. We got engaged ... I gave her a ring and everything. We did a few digs together, nothing major ... until we went to Egypt. By then, we’d met her father, who was definitely hard-edged, but didn’t seem to care anything about what we did.”

“The dig was important, Khan, the most important we’d ever done. We had a big crew, friends along with us, to catalog and safely pack and transport all of the items we believed we’d find. Everything went along fine for the first few weeks, as we located the site, found a safe way inside and opened the main chambers …” He swallowed hard, unaware of a single tear leaking from one eye and down his face.

Khan grumbled softly, upset on Jim's behalf. With only the tip of his tongue, he gave a few gentle licks to Jim's face, taking away his tears and encouraging him to continue. Even if this was common knowledge for his family, Jim clearly needed this. To tell a friend, to tell Khan everything.

Jim smiled at the rough swipes, knowing they were a sign of Khan’s affection. “Yeah, the rest must be so obvious … It was a trap, Khan. We were all inside the main chamber, when there was a commotion outside. Gunshots. Shouts. Screams.” He gritted his teeth in memory. “We had a devoted crew of native workers and guides with us, and Marcus’ group was killing them. We carried arms, but only for small parties of bandits, not for facing the armed crew that Marcus brought.

In the chaos, I lost track of mom, Chris ... and Carol. Mom got away unscratched, with the help of some of my friends, but I later discovered that Chris had been shot in the back. He nearly lost the use of his legs ... couldn’t walk for months. And Carol wasn’t there when we finally managed to regroup. So, I went back for her.”

He took a few more deep breaths to try to keep himself calm enough to tell the whole story. “I found her in one of the tents and tried to free her. At least, that’s what I thought I was doing, but she only laughed at me.” His lower lip wobbled just a bit at the memory of that haughty laughter in his face. “Told me I was a stupid, gullible fool and didn’t deserve a woman like her. She told me I would be lucky to find a woman raised in a sewer who’d be willing to put up with my needy, whiny pawing patheticness.” He recited that in perfect order as it had fallen from her lips. “That is, if I had lived long enough. And then she stabbed me.” He tugged open his shirt and showed Khan the jagged scar from his own knife, one he had given her. “They dumped me in the desert just outside their camp to die.”

The human race had its difficulties and troubled individuals, but the way Jim explained things made Khan think that some people were truly vile in this future. It made his skin crawl, in fact, a fine ridge of hairs rose along his back, upset by these events and that such cruel people existed.

“I would have died, if Bones hadn’t come back for me,” Jim said. “He stitched up the wound and did the best he could for Chris and me. Because of him ... and according to Bones, because we’re both stubborn sons-of-bitches, we managed to survive. But Chris and mom had lost nearly everything- all of their expedition goods and tools and research and the money they used to finance the dig. Half of our party were dead and another half injured. We could barely limp back to the closest town, and there was no law close to bring the Marcus group to justice. We learned later that Alexander Marcus led the party that attacked ours. And since then, they’ve dogged our every step. We successfully fought them off a few times, but eventually, mom and Chris decided we couldn’t keep getting people killed and we stopped doing major expeditions anymore. They basically retired, but I know it kills them as much as it kills me to have to give it up. To let the Marcuses destroy so many sites and loot them for personal gain.” He took a deep, gulping breath. “I hate her, Khan. All I want to do is return the favor of hurting her …”
Though he did not know what sort of confrontation they would be getting themselves into. Khan did know one thing. He was going to see that Jim remained safe. And Chris, and Winona. And everyone that they ended up hiring on to help. Khan was a vessel between mankind and the gods after all, if he could not protect them, then what good was he. So to reassure his friend, Khan rolled his large head against Jim, rubbing and snuggling his face in close.

Jim grabbed hold of Khan and clutched at his neck, gripping at the long mane. He just held on as Khan rubbed against him, soothing and easing his pain. And there was a small sense of relief from having told his story to someone outside of his immediate friends and family, those who knew from living it. “I feel so stupid, too,” he admitted for Khan’s sharp ears. “Like I brought poison into my family and nearly got them all killed. I feel like I let them all down.”

Mistakes exists for everyone. Khan huffed and grumbled softly. And people generally only become experienced experts, after making a few severe mistakes in their lifetime. But Jim had done what was right for him, at the time. As had his friends and family. And now, he was going to do what was right for him, again. And Khan was going to be with him. He hoped Jim did not see him as a poison, but an antidote to cure this wound from the past.

“I need you to be sure that you want this, Khan,” Jim said. “We don’t have to go back. This is your home now, for as long as you’re happy here. If we’re going to return, it should be for the right reasons. Not because I want revenge on Carol and her father. That shouldn’t be part of this.” He scratched behind Khan’s ears, looking up at his friend with eyes now rimmed red.

Khan nuzzled and licked Jim's face gently. But slowly, the paws under Jim's body transformed into arms and hands. And the large black mane around his head faded back into long black hair. Khan kissed the side of Jim's face, just once as he settled next to his friend. "I go, where you go."

“Do you want to go back and protect your temple?” Jim asked. “Do you want to get your things back?” He was not at all flustered by the change, relieved to be able to talk to Khan now, though it had been easier to spill his story to a lion than a man. Even though he understood them to be the same creature. “It will not be safe for you ... for any of us. And I don’t want my anger to be the deciding factor.”


Jim laughed softly at the way Khan wanted to protect the horses and said, “I guess we’ll have to get some new horses than. We can leave them with Bones in New York, so they don’t have to cross the ocean. And I bet you won’t want to leave behind the horses we get in India to go back to your temple from. So, they’ll have to come back with us. And if you do this every time, we’re going to end up with a horse zoo.” He felt lighter than he had in a long time, a little more of the venom leached from his system and a plan to return to stop Carol and her father for good. “They’ll try to get you,” he said. “Carol and Alexander Marcus. They’ll want you for your power and your knowledge. They’ll do anything.”

Khan however purred softly and kissed Jim once more on the side of the face, still feeling a bit lion-like after his transformation. "Khan strong." He said, feeling that the idea of anyone trapping him or hurting him, absurd. "Jim, safe with Khan."

“I’m not thinking of me,” Jim said firmly. “I’m thinking of you. I don’t want you to get hurt by them. You’re my friend, Khan, and this was not your problem until we broke in on you. Not that
I’m not glad I freed you. That was too long to be stuck in there, alive.” He did not mind the kisses, associating them with the lion licks, too. “But we don’t know yet if Khan is safe from our weapons. Please promise me that you’ll be careful.”

“Yes, Jim. Careful.” Khan said, resting his head on Jim's shoulder, settled with him comfortably under the large tree which provided shade on this sunny day. "Good friend. Best friend. Careful."

Jim nodded and kept Khan close to him for the moment, still exhausted from the run and the emotional venting. He touched the scar on his chest, lingering over the raised lines so close to his heart. And he wondered about how this unique man he’d found in the middle of an ancient temple had bypassed all of the guards he’d erected around his heart since Carol’s betrayal. In truth, he’d made no new friends since then, nor even considered trusting any as a lover. Only Christine, brought in by Bones to work with him, had managed to gain Jim’s trust. And not nearly so much as she might have before. “Best friend,” he confirmed. “Jim is lucky to have as a Khan friend.”

Watching this action, Khan slid his hand over Jim's chest as well, covering Jim's fingers with his own hand. "My friend." Khan was honest and direct and in a way, very transparent. He did not speak in lies or deceit. He had anger, but also knew how to be gentle. And in some things, had a very innocent approach to life. From a beggar on the street that might have made terrible decisions in their life, Khan showed compassion and kindness. And to his dear friend Jim, he showed love and loyalty, without compromise.

“This tree is my friend, too,” Jim said. “I’ve climbed her a thousand times when I was a kid, to get as far off the ground as I could. And she never let me fall. Even when I got far higher than a kid should and thought sure I would plunge to the ground. She kept me safe. Bur oak tree.” He pointed to the branches above them. “Bur oak.”

"Bur oak." Khan smiled and turned his gaze upwards to the tree and the massive branches that stretched out to either side. "Good friend." He said, easily believing in the good in nature, he had great respect for all life after all. "Good tree, keep Jim safe."

Jim figured Khan would view trees as being perfectly reasonable friends and smiled contentedly at the idea of the oak folding him in its branches to protect and keep him safe. “This oak’s over a hundred years old. This tree was here before the Kirks, and hopefully, she’ll be here for a long time more.” He slid his hand down the length of Khan’s back and back up, as if he were still petting the lion version. “Khan be here a long time, too.”

"One hundred years. Old tree. Very smart." Khan said, meaning that the tree was wise and experienced and had seen much in its lifetime. "Friend for life." Khan said with a soft purr, keeping close to Jim, face tucked close to his shoulder.

“Yes, she has been my friend all my life,” Jim agreed, soothed by the rumble issuing from his companion. “I need to make sure I thank her more often. How would you thank her, Khan?”

"Listen, watch-" Khan said and moved up onto his knees and faced the tree near the trunk. "Khan speak, Jim words." He said, wanting to use English as best as he could so that Jim could do it himself. Leaning forward, Khan pressed his forehead to the tree and his hands flat against the bark. "Thank you, friend. Thank you, strong friend. Protect Jim. Protect Khan. Strong life." He said by example, then added a little in his own language. "Thank you for looking after Jim. For giving him somewhere safe to go. For listening when his voice needed to be heard. Thank you for your strength and wisdom."

Jim followed after him and assumed the same position, respectful of Khan’s belief. He said, “Thank you, friend. Thank you, strong friend. Thank you for your protection of me. Thank you for your
protection of Khan. Please bless us with a strong life. Please have a strong life.” He glanced over at Khan and added, “Thank you for looking after my home when I am far away. I wish you many offspring.”

Khan looked over to Jim with a smile when his friend added a few more things to say to the tree. “Speak more, to tree.” He encouraged, then pressed his head against the tree again, focusing his energy on the tree that was unlike any from his home. A new friend indeed.

Jim chuckled and told the tree the story of how he met Khan and how they were going back to try and preserve his temple. And somehow, he felt like the tree enjoyed the story, the same as he did when he was a child. He petted the bark a few times and climbed to his feet. “We should go back inside. I’m pretty hungry ... you better be a lion again until we get you new clothes.”

Khan smiled as he listened to Jim talk to his friend the tree. But as it became time to go back to the house, Khan pressed his hand over his heart, then to the bark of the tree in parting. Though instead of standing to go, he transformed back into a lion and gave a soft roar, leaning his shoulder against Jim's legs.

Jim reached down to ruffle the lion’s mane and tugged gently. “This time, we can stroll back. I’ll show you another route.” He turned and began to head down the lane they had reached the tree on, but in the opposite direction. “We’ll just turn by the barn and circle back to the house. After lunch, if you want, I’ll give you a complete tour of the grounds.”

Willing to go wherever Jim lead, Khan walked casually beside his friend. Though on occasion his ears flicked forward and he made a soft sound of excitement to see something new to his eyes. Cornfields bowing together in a breeze, a few birds taking off from the high grass, and a bucket knocking against the edge of the well it hung over.

Jim detoured a moment to peer over a corral fence at a big old stud bull, who contentedly grazed on tall grass. “This is Slyvester, Khan. Slyvester is the daddy of a lot of fancy little calves who grew up to by fancy cows and bulls and steers. He’s an old boy now. My brother bought him when he was a calf, but he’s too old for breeding now. Don’t be fooled, though, he’s still got a mean temper.”

Khan strolled up to the fence and placed his muzzle on one of the rails. He took in a few deep breaths of the animal, calling to him softly. Hello friend. He had never seen a bull so large and strong. The breed was different then anything he had encountered before.

Slyvester raised his head and looked warily in the direction of the big cat, tail swishing away flies. “Huh, that’s the nicest I’ve ever seen him be to another animal,” Jim said and lightly pulled Khan’s ear. “You’ve got the right words or aura to make even Sylvester somewhat friendly. At least, he’s not charging the fence.” He scratched the top of Khan’s head and turned to continue the stroll back to the house. “When we get some time, I’ll show you the buffalo.”

Have a good day, enjoy your lunch! Khan nearly managed to smile as a lion. He then once more followed Jim's lead, keeping close at his side. He could see how this might be a very nice home, even if they did not stay to enjoy it long.

Jim broke into a light jog as they approached the porch, and he led Khan in the backdoor, fetching their packs. “My room is upstairs. You can have your own room or sleep with me, whatever you want. I have a huge bed.” He trotted up the stairs to his room, opening the door to let them both inside. “Come in, Khan. He set down their packs and brought out new clothes for Khan.
Khan climbed the stairs, his weight as a lion making the wood creak. But as he entered into Jim's room, he stood up as a man and smiled. "Nice home. Jim happy, to home?" He asked, wanting to share in his friends joy at being home with family and somewhere familiar, even if for only a little while.

Jim sat on his bed and bounced a little, listening to the creak of the old box mattress. "I am happy," he said with a smile. "When I was a child, I could not wait to leave, but now, I'm glad this place is still here for me." He lightly patted the cover in a fond gesture. "Do you want to stay in my room or have your own room?"

Khan sat on the bed with Jim where he had been invited. "Khan stay with Jim." He said, having grown quite familiar and comfortable with sharing the same space with him, that even being in the room next door seemed like an unnecessary separation. Pulling on the shirt that Jim had provided for him, Khan looked around the room that was so very modern to his eyes. Color on the walls, and art. Glass windows and shutters to protect them in a storm. To his eyes, it was all amazing.

"Good," Jim said and leaned into Khan briefly. "I’d prefer not to be separated from you, Khan. It’s stupid, here at home, but I’ve gotten used to having you close. I’d worry, I think with the wall between us." He stood and moved around the room, running a hand over his dressing table and bureau, before heading to the bookshelves. He removed one of his favorites, an illustrated Shakespeare, and carried it over to Khan, sitting on the bed again. He opened the pages and showed him some of the illustrations.

As Jim had gotten up to walk around his room, Khan stood briefly to pull his pants on, before sitting down once more. "What is- book?" He asked, knowing it was a book, but wanting to know what kind it was. "Jim, read?"

"These are plays ... stories performed by people for other people to watch and enjoy," Jim said, "by the most famous writer of all- William Shakespeare. He wrote funny stuff and sad stuff and drama. This is some of the most famous. He wrote them over two hundred years ago, so his language, though English, is very different even than what we speak now." He randomly chose a page and read, "No, 'tis not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church-door; but 'tis enough,'twill serve: ask for me to-morrow, and you shall find me a grave man. I am peppered, I warrant, for this world. A plague o' both your houses! 'Zounds, a dog, a rat, a mouse, a cat, to scratch a man to death! A braggart, a rogue, a villain, that fights by the book of arithmetic! Why the devil came you between us? I was hurt under your arm." As he finished the little tidbit, he looked over at Khan to see what he picked up of the words.

Khan had been entranced. The cadence was very similar to his own, when it came to speaking English words. And so the truth of it was, he had gotten most of what was being said. "Scratch man to death!" He repeated back, "Angry! People, fight?" He asked, wanting context.

Jim smiled and said, "Well, it’s a pretty complicated story. This is a fight scene, but most of the play is about love and the foolish conflict between two families. There’s a lot of love scenes ..." He flipped through the pages again and stopped at another famous scene. "O, speak again, bright angel! for thou art as glorious to this night, being o’er my head As is a winged messenger of heaven Unto the white-upturned wondering eyes Of mortals that fall back to gaze on him When he bestrides the lazy-pacing clouds And sails upon the bosom of the air."

Khan hooked his arm with Jim and leaned into him, looking over his shoulder at the pages of the book. Many print words were still nonsense scratches to him, but listening to Jim and looking at the pattern of words written on the page was exciting for him. "Speak again." Khan said with a laugh, mimicking this phrase so that Jim would read to him more.
Jim continued the scene, thinking his companion would enjoy the reading, “O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo? Deny thy father and refuse thy name; Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love, And I'll no longer be a Capulet. Tis but thy name that is my enemy; Thou art thyself, though not a Montague. What's Montague? it is nor hand, nor foot, Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part Belonging to a man. O, be some other name! What's in a name? that which we call a rose By any other name would smell as sweet; So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd, Retain that dear perfection which he owes Without that title. Romeo, doff thy name, And for that name which is no part of thee Take all myself.” He put a bit of dramatic romance into his words, playing to the drama of the scene.

The words were amazing to Khan's ears. They held rhythm, and power, and passion. "This book, good. Words, pretty." He said and smiled at Jim, hoping that Jim would read to him again like this in the days to come.

“The best,” Jim agreed. “I'll read you an entire play from start to finish, if you want. Would you like to hear all of ‘Romeo and Juliet,’ Khan?” He smiled at his companion and set the book aside. “But for now, we should go have some lunch and speak more with my mom and Chris. I’ve got a lot of letters to write after lunch, to old friends who can help us with our expedition. I’ll have them meet us in New York to take the ship back to India and then on to your temple.”

"Please, Jim. Read ... Romeo and Juli-Et. Good, thank you." Khan said with a smile, looking forward to it. "Why-Nona and Chris, like Khan? Good?” Khan asked, uncertain since their encounter had been short before Khan transformed into a lion as a means to explain things.

“Well, you startled them a little, but yes, they’ll like you,” Jim said with a friendly smile and a light pat to his leg. “You’re obviously my friend, and it’s been a long time since I made any new friends. And you’re a good man, Khan. Best friend. My mom and Chris, they can see that. Good.” He lightly straightened his companion’s shirt and patted his right shoulder. “Come on. Time for lunch. Chris is an excellent cook. Much better than mom or me.”

"Thank you, Jim. Good family.” Khan said and stood, keeping close to his friend while they headed downstairs for lunch.
That evening, as Chris fed a small fire in the fireplace, Winona pulled her son aside, speaking to him privately. "Do you think your friend can answer some questions, Jim? Does he comprehend well?" She asked, "There are so many things I feel need to be asked."

Jim looked over to where Khan sat and said with a private smile, "He understands a lot of words and concepts, mom, but he doesn't always have the right words to communicate back. Still, with some creative thinking, we should be able to understand each other. Let me get some paper and pencils. Do you have any colored ones?" He knew they were expensive to get, but thought they might help get the communications through. "Khan, will you come here, please? My mom wants to talk to you. May we have some hot chocolate, Chris?"

"I'll make some for everyone," Chris said and headed for the kitchen after the fire was built up.

"Yes, I have a few colored pencils with my notebook in the study." Winona said, "You can go get those." She said, giving Jim a small push on his arm to get him going. She was very interested in questioning Khan, and felt they had been polite through lunch, and dinner, and now was time for answers.

"Yes, Jim." Khan moved away from the wall he had been examining. Many of the beams in the house were large, as if an entire tree had been used just to support one wall. And it probably had, but this sort of architecture was new to him.

"Khan, I would like to ask you some questions, about where you are from. And some of the items Jim brought back. You see, I have some items from around the same time, and I think you can help explain what they are for. Alright?"

Khan felt uncertain, not knowing if he could explain well enough, but agreed to listen and at least try. "Yes."

Jim brought back paper and pencils, including the colored ones and sat down at the table, settling them in front of him. "Please, come sit down beside me, Khan. We'll figure out how to talk about everything. We always do, right?" He signaled to his mother as well. "Khan is good with working with drawings, too. We've used them several times before to figure out more complex communications." He thought it would relax his friend, too, as his mother could be quite intense.

Khan sat down next to Jim and reached for one of the pencils, familiar and comfortable with the tool. As it often helped express ideas or new concepts that were universal in the form of images, but Khan had not learned the words for yet.

"Great." Winona said and sat down as well, and like before, noted that instead of having her notebook on hand, she was holding a dish towel. "Chris!" She called out, "Can you get my notebook from the study?" Then shook her head at herself with a light huff. "Alright, Khan. I want you to tell me everything about your mother."

But this question earned Winona a completely blank look. "Khan, zero mother." He said, not having one, or remembering one.

"No, no. Like I am Jim's mother, right? I want to know about your mother. Khan's mother."

"Khan, zero mother." Khan said, insisting on this answer.
“So, where did Khan come from?” Jim asked instead. “Winona Jim mother. Khan no mother, so where Khan come from?”

Chris brought in Winona’s notebook and placed it in front of her, along with her own pencil. “Chocolate will be out in a moment.”

"Thank you, Chris." Winona said, patting his arm in thanks as he passed. Then she turned her attention back on Khan. "Your mother, Nahkmet. Tell me about her.”


“So, you were raised by a village of people without a mother or father?” Jim asked. “And when you grew up, you were the leader of the village?” He was used to Khan’s manner of speech with the words he did know.

Chris returned with a silver platter, on which he carried a porcelain chocolate set with chocolate pot and cups. He smiled at them and took a seat across from Winona. “Does everyone want some?”

“Yes. Khan, lead.” Khan said, confident that Jim was understanding him at least.

"Yes, thank you Chris." Winona said, tapping her pencil on the edge of the table, a little bothered that she could not get Khan to talk about Nahkmet. "Khan-" Winona tried again, this time opening up her own notebook and setting out a few photographs of a tablet she had once been allowed to study. She also had sketches in her notebook, to detail that the images did not capture, plus her English translations on the opposite page. "Do you know this story, Khan?"

**The Lion Goddess, Nahkmet, Story Of the First Alliance**

> Once, the earth was green and fertile across the lands. But a sickness came and the green turned to dust and sand, except for one lone oasis. There, the animals of the world retreated for refuge. But it was difficult, as predators stood beside prey, in the last stretch of green grass and fresh water in the world. Among them was a lioness, Nahkmet, the top predator, but she was also the wisest of all the animals. The last green space on earth, was her home, and she shared it with the other animals.

> To show their thanks, the monkeys in the trees offered to pick her fruit and drop it from the tree tops so that she might eat. To this she said thank you, but that she could not eat the fruit from the trees. She was happy that the monkeys could eat from the trees in her green space, and wished them well.

> To show their thanks, the mice came out of the grass, half of them laying down in front of her in offering. The mice said, we wish to sacrifice ourselves to you in thanks, so that the rest of our families might live. To this she said, thank you, but that she would not eat them, as even though they were small, their lives were still important, and that they should continue to live with their families.

> To show their thanks, the eagles offered to take to the sky and fly out into the deep desert to find those that had died and bring them back so that she might eat. To this she said, thank you, but do not waste your energy on such hardship on my account, the dead of the desert will be consumed by the sands, not us.
To show their thanks the catfish in the water of the last oasis on earth said, when this water dries up, we will suffocate and die, you should eat us, to become strong. To this she said, thank you, but the monsoon will come and flood the earth once more. Soon the water will swell and you will live again as you once did in the rivers and lakes of the world.

Then one day, out of the desert came man, his wife, and their child.

The man immediately went to the water and drank his fill. But the woman knelt at the edge of the water and prayed to the lioness, giving her thanks for this gift of water, and for sharing it with her.

The man then threw a spear into a wild boar, with the intention of eating it. But the lioness was angry with man by then and pounced on him. She told him, you have no respect for life, no respect for the last place in the world there is peace and beauty. For this, I sentence you to death, and she tore his throat out.

The woman, having watched her husband die, begged the lioness Nahkmet. Please do not kill me, or my child. We came out of the desert wasteland, we are hungry and thirsty, just like any other animal.

To this Nahkmet said, since you showed proper respect when drinking from the water of my oasis, then I know you will show respect for the life of others. Teach your son this lesson, so that he might be a better man, then his father. If you show respect to the dead boar and his family, then you may consume his body and live.

Grateful for this chance, the woman, holding her child so that he might learn, began to pray over the body of the dead boar. Not her husband. She thanked him for his life, so that she and her son might live, and wept that this was the way they would survive. After she prayed for the boar, she then began to dig at the roots of the trees to find tubers and offered them to the family of boar, giving them food in exchange for the life of one of their own.

Finally, she and her son ate from the boar all that they could. But not wishing to waste the rest of his life, she offered the rest of his flesh to the other predators in the oasis so that they might live as well.

But as the days passed, the woman and her son grew hungry again. Seeing this, a mother cow approached woman and said, woman, I know what it is to be a Mother. After my calf drinks from me, so too can you and your child drink my milk.

Because of this, the woman promised to always remember the cow in her prayers, first. As it is an intimate gift, to give something of yourself to another.

Seeing that the cow had shown love and care for another, the sheep followed by example. The sheep then approached the woman and said, woman, I know what it is to be cold at night. If you are gentle, you may cut off our wool and use it to wrap yourself and your child at night so that you might stay warm.

Because of this, the woman promised to always remember the sheep in her prayers, second. As it is an intimate gift, to give something of yourself to another.

Seeing that the cow and the sheep had shown love and care for another, the chicken followed by example. The chicken then approached the woman and said, woman, I
know what it is to be hungry. If you give me a warm and safe place to rest, you may have the eggs that I lay so that you might eat.

Because of this, the woman promised to always remember the chicken in her prayers, third. As it is an intimate gift, to give something of yourself to another.

"Yes." Khan said after a few minutes of inspecting the images and the drawings. "Lesson, Nahkmet teach ... man, woman ... be good. Show, respect. Life, good."

"Oh, that’s what you do when we eat meat,” Jim said, understanding better now, though he’d always suspected it was a form of religious respect. Rather like saying ‘grace’ before a meal. He pointed to the story and asked, “Is this a story or truth to teach a lesson?”

Chris listened quietly to the interactions, although he also read the story, even as he poured out equal measures of the warm chocolate drink for them all. He set a cup and saucer in front of each other them.

Khan looked at Jim and smiled, feeling he had said something funny. "Sun, truth. Nahkmet, truth. Story, truth." He said, clearly believing if the sun was real, then so was Nahkmet, and the genesis story of mankind. "Gods speak Khan, Khan speak, people. Gods, give Khan. Khan, give people. Good." Which was also why 'union blessings' were so intimate, as it had to do with giving a part of yourself.

"Khan, not many people can speak to gods. And those who do, are often liars. Do you understand, liars?" Winona asked, keeping her eyes on Khan, then to Jim to see if that was something that had come up before.

"People who do not speak truth," Jim said to clarify. “People like Carol.” He knew Khan understood that she had lied to him. “Does Khan hear Gods? Hear their voices?” He picked up his cup and sipped the warm liquid, smiling at the flavor, perfect as only Chris managed. Interrupting their flow, he pointed to Khan’s drink. "Please, try. Very good. Chocolate."

"Chocolate!" Khan smiled instantly, remembering this very clearly while trekking cross country with Jim. The distraction was welcome and he took the cup and began to sip, enjoying the smooth, rich texture of the hot drink. "Good!"

"Khan, I think Nahkmet is your mother. She is a goddess. But she could not keep you, and left you on earth. And I think, Singrir is your father." She said, turning to another page in her notebook. "Do you know Singrir, Khan?"

"Yes. Khan speak Nahkmet and Singrir. Sun and moon. No ... voice ... gods speak ... heart." He said, lightly touching his own chest.

"Khan doesn’t seem to think he has a mother, Winona,” Chris said. “Why don’t you tell him why you think they’re his parents.”

Jim nodded agreement to this, even as he considered Khan’s words about hearing the Gods in his heart. That sounded a lot like following your faith than being a prophet. But obviously, Khan did have special abilities, far beyond a normal man. But he was also innocent and kind in a way he didn’t think of Gods being. For example, his reaction to chocolate. Jim lifted his own cup to Khan and said, “Chocolate is good. All forms.”

"Khan, there is a story, that Nahkmet and Singrir fell in love. But the goddess of the sun, and the god of the moon could not share their entire lives together. They had only this-" Winona then drew the
basic image of a sun, with solar flares, and half overlapping it another circle. "Sun. Moon. Together. We call this an eclipse. They cover each other. Have you seen this? It is rare. Do you know what this is?"

But for Khan, these were too many questions at once. So he took another sip of his hot chocolate.

"Khan, I think because you speak to Nahkmet and Singrir, because they talk to you through your heart, I think they are your parents. Do you understand?" Winona asked, pressing the issue.

This was all news to Khan however. "Khan ... Lion of the Desert. Khan, speak to gods. Khan ... simple, Khan."


Khan listened and followed Jim's logic with better understanding. He had no memory of this. And no one had told him the story of Nahkmet and Singrir having a child together before. But maybe it was true. "Maybe, true." He echoed back, thinking it over. "Khan, part sun. Khan, part moon." He thought it over and then took off his necklace, which had a symbol that was meant to represent him. "Eclipse. Khan words." He said, indicating to the symbol, that even though it was not as straightforward as two circles like Winona had drawn, it represented the concept of an eclipse.

“May I look?” Jim asked, leaning in to look even more closely at the pendant, which traveled with Khan no matter what form he took. “The workmanship is amazing.” He caught his friend’s eyes. “What is Khan’s first memory?”

"Memory- past thought." Khan considered and took off the pendant from around his neck so that the others could look, though he kept his fingers on the chain, in a way making it clear that this was not something he was prepared to give to them forever, like he was with the other items from his temple. "Memory ... sun, desert ... rabbit, snake ... memory ..." It really was a long time ago, and he could not remember as he once did. "Village, find Khan ... good omen." He said, not having a word for this in English. "Village, care Khan."

Jim did not touch the pendant, respecting the way Khan continue to hold onto the object, but did inspect it more closely for a moment. He leaned back and said, “Well, mom, you might be right, but there’s no way to be sure. Khan doesn’t remember.” He glanced at Winona with a grin full of mischief, knowing how much she disliked being unable to prove a theory.

"Khan." Winona started again, following a different line of questioning now. "You said you can also transform into a big dog ... do you mean, a wolf? Like Singrir, the wolf?"

Khan fastened the necklace once more about his neck. "Singrir ... moon, god ..."

Turning a few more pages in her book, Winona indicated to her notes, in which she had copied down another story, and a few pictures that had been present with the original source. A large wolf, with smaller wolf or dog-like animals at his feet, and a large horse, with smaller horse-like animals at his feet. "This is Singrir. Wolf. Is this Khan, too?"

The Wolf God, Singrir, Story Of the Second Alliance

Two men escaping an attack on their village climbed a great mountain in hopes they might speak to the gods, to ask them to show mercy to their people. As the men
collapsed, unable to climb any further, a black wolf with silver eyes appeared to them. He had never been this close to mortal Man before, but could see that they were in pain. What brings you here, the wolf asked Man.

Please wolf, do not devour us. One of the men said. We are the last from our village to escape with our lives. We have come to this mountain to speak with the gods and ask for their mercy. We cannot escape Non-Man. They follow our fires and steal our food. They attack and kill us, day and night. And in the end, eat our dead without respect for life. Please wolf, we will sacrifice ourselves to you, if you speak our case to the gods.

The wolf considered the words of Man, before he spoke. Man, I am the Night Wolf, Singrir, that chases the moon across the night sky. I cannot stop my chase, but I will give you my sons and daughters to help you. They are not Gods. They are Dogs. Be kind and share your meals with them, and they will show you loyalty. They will protect your villages, your people, and your crops. And they will fight at your side, should you need to face the Non-Men again. But never forget, they are my descendants.

And so the first dogs came forward from the rock of the mountains.

Thank you, Singrir, the Night Wolf. Your gift will save many lives, and preserve our food every harvest. But even with such a great gift of your children, we are afraid of Non-Man. They are much larger than Man, and much stronger.

Having overheard the Night Wolf and Man speak, the Lord of Horses came from the mist, to give them a solution. Man, the Night Wolf, Singrir has given you his children, a great gift which I will match. I will also give you my sons and daughters, which you might ride into battle against the Non-Man. On their backs, you will be taller and stronger than Non-Man. Be kind and care for them, and they will show you the same loyalty as dogs. But never forget, they are my descendants.

And so the first horses came forward from the clouds around the mountains.

"Yes, Khan." He said, indicating to the large wolf picture, and not the dogs.

“Oh, I can’t wait to see you as the wolf, too,” Jim breathed as he looked over the picture Khan indicated. “You can speak to other animals, can’t you? You speak their languages?”

"Animals, friends. Good friends. Khan listen." Khan said, though tried to clarify, "Khan speak, Nahkmet. Khan speak, Singrir." He said, meaning that he only really spoke directly to them, and therefore, only represented the lion or wolf. But like the god and goddess, spoke to other animals as well. "Where ... rabbit?” He asked, pointing to Winona's notes. "Three animal. Wolf. Horse. Rabbit. Where rabbit?"

"This is all the text that was available to me, Khan. Is there another story? What is the story about the rabbit?’ Winona asked, eager to write it down.

But Khan did not have to the words to tell stories. "Khan, no English word, rabbit story."

“We can talk about that once Khan has words,” Jim said with a wink at his friend. “There’s no rush. Khan will be with us for awhile.” He reached out and squeezed his friend’s right hand gently. “Is the lion not the fourth animal, Khan? Four animals- wolf, horse, rabbit, lion?”

Though handshakes were still strange to him, holding Jim's hand was not. He smiled, but then laughed, as Jim had misunderstood and gotten it wrong. "Moon. Night. Three animals. Wolf. Horse."
Rabbit. Sun. Day. Three animals. Lion. Cow. Snake." Khan said, then finally felt it was time to draw some pictures to help explain. First the page was separated into two sections, the sun and moon. And the first animal under the sun was the lion, which branched out into the cow and snake. While on the moon side, the first animal was the wolf, which then branched out into the horse and rabbit.

Jim looked at the drawings with a bemused smile, wondering at the interesting progression of animals. “Did the rest of the animals also come from these animals?” he wondered to Khan. “Bears? Lizards? Fish?” He picked up a pencil and drew little representations of each animal, not well, but adequate to show Khan what each one was.


Jim followed all of this with intense interest, aware of the eyes of his elders (which was everyone else at the table) on him, and tried his own hand at it. “Well, fish is river. But who is the guiding hand? I’m going Moon. Fish. River. How did I do?” He looked at Khan, hopeful that he’d gotten that progression correctly.

"Yes!" Khan grinned, delighted that Jim was showing understanding. "Moon. Fish. River. Good, Jim!" Khan said, adding fish a little lower on this upside-down pyramid. But according to him, and the stories of his culture, all animals and all life were important. It was just that the Lion and the Wolf were at the top, looking out for all those under them. And Khan, acting as a bridge somewhere in the middle.

“So, who else makes sense for the sun?” Jim mused softly and asked. “Sun. Elephant. Plains?” He drew a little savannah like area on the paper with an elephant animal on it. “Elephant? Plains?” He was not sure his drawing would be adequate to explain his meaning. His elephant was a bit pathetic looking, reckoning by Chris’ chuckle.

"Yes, good. Elephant. Sun." Khan said with another bright smile. "Understand?" He asked, looking to Chris and Winoana.

But Jim's mother was busy writing and sketching everything in her own book for future reference, taking in everything Khan had to offer her about the past, while he seemed willing to explain things. He was an amazing resource, many of these answers were likely to go undiscovered otherwise, or take years to puzzle together.

“I think I understand,” Chris said slowly. “Some animals I think I would not be able to guess, though. Like bats.” He drew a bat, hand more skilled than Jim’s. “I would assume Moon. Moon. Bat. Sky?” He drew a sky around the bat, so it appeared to be flying. “Is that possible?”

Jim grinned at Chris for trying to show his understanding and lightly kicked Winona under the table. “Mom, show a few of your guest manners. Don’t make Chris do everything.”

This was where it did indeed get a little more complicated. So by example, Khan said, "Moon. Horse. Cloud." The real concept was mist, but cloud would do for now. "Moon. Bat. Steam." Though steam was not a concept Jim and Khan had discussed before. "Steam is ..." He held one hand out and closed his fingers into a fist. "This, fire." He said, then held his other hand flat out. "This, water." Then folded his flat hand over his fisted hand to smother it. "Steam."

“Steam?” Jim asked, bewildered as to why bats were associated with steam. If that was even the
word Khan meant. He picked up the chocolate pot and lifted the lid, pointing to some of the steam that rose from inside when he did so. “Steam. Steam?”

"Yes, steam." Khan smiled. Glad to have the new word, and success in relaying the concept. "Moon. Bat. Steam."

Winona continued to write everything down, even as Jim had given her a not so subtle nudge under the table. But to fill in the blanks to some of her notes, she then prompted. "Alright, then sun, sheep, grassland?" She asked, wanting to assign the animals in the stories she had translated.

"Sun. Sheep. Mountain." The wolf too was associated with the mountains, but it was ruled by the moon, whereas sheep were ruled by the sun.

“Wait, I’m confused,” Chris said. “Why bat steam? What does steam have to do with bats? Everything else makes sense, but that logic I did not follow.”

“Maybe they’re not all logical,” Jim said. “Khan. In Jim home, we have sheep, mountain, but we also have sheep, grassland. If sheep live in grassland, Sun, sheep, grassland?” He was trying to see if animals could be multiple things.

"No." Khan said, answering Jim directly, this time not laughing at him, because this was a reasonable question, and not silly to him like some of his others. "Begin, one lion. One lion, desert. Begin, one sheep. One sheep, mountain." He said, trying to explain that all of this had to do with the first of their kind, the first animal, and their ruling forces. Even though dogs and horses and other animals had migrated and moved over the years, the first of their kind, and all their descendants were to be known this way.

But then he considered Chris’s question and confusion. So Khan turned the page in his notebook so that he could draw a new picture. He drew a mountain, and then with one of the colored pencils, to focus in on what he was getting at, Khan drew a cave system, including a few bats. "Bat." But in addition to this, he then grabbed another colored pencil to draw the second concept, venting points from the mountain, and therefore, from the caves, steam. "Steam."

“So, sheep started in the mountains,” Jim said. “The things you never knew you never knew.” He chuckled and sipped more of his hot chocolate, enjoying this conversation.

Chris also studied Khan’s drawings and finally said, “Well, I’d never have associated it that way, but I guess it makes sense in an abstract fashion.” He looked between his adopted family and said, “We could do this all night. Do you have other questions, Winona?” She usually did.

"Yes, I want to hear more of his native language. And what customs they observed. Explain religious ceremonies. Family dynamics. Agriculture. How far they traveled. Their laws. How they marked the passage of time. And-“ Winona shut her mouth as she caught a glance from Chris. "It can wait." They would have a long time traveling together after all. Not everything had to be solved tonight.

Jim laughed aloud at his mother and leaned in to lightly hug Khan with one arm. “Yeah, don’t scare him away, mom. He and I are working on all those things slowly. We’ve been doing it for all the time we travel together … He’s got a lot of questions about us, too. Our house … you should see him examine everything inside.” He turned to face Khan squarely. “In fact. Khan have questions for us?”

"Yes." But where to begin. Khan considered, then pointed to Winona’s book of notes and one of the photos still on the table. "What is-?" He asked, holding up the piece of paper that perfectly captured
Jim stared at the photograph for a long moment and then blurted, “Aw, Hell, how do I even answer that?”

Chris said, “That’s called a calotype, Khan. It’s a way of capturing an image from life on to paper. We don’t own a camera ... the device that takes the image, but we always brought one on our digs. The process is complicated, but anything can be captured by a camera and put on paper now. It takes an hour or so, but it’s worth it for documenting sites during study.”

The image was quite interesting to Khan, as the picture had depth to it, but the paper itself was flat. "Khan enjoy." He said with a smile, pushing some of the pictures around on the table. "What is-?" He then pointed to the large wood burning stove in the kitchen. He had seen Chris make food on it for both lunch and dinner, so he understood that it was used for cooking, but how? And what was it called?

“It’s an amazing invention,” Jim agreed, “from not very long ago ... the camera I mean. This-” he hopped up and moved over to pat the iron appliance that Khan was pointing to “-is a stove. You put wood inside, light a fire, and you can warm rooms and cook food with it. On a cold night, there’s nothing like huddling by a stove.” He opened the front to show the ashes of the wood they’d used before, needing to be cleaned out later. “What do you think?”

"Yes, very good. Stove." Khan said with a smile, thinking this was a great thing to have inside a home. It was manageable and self contained, so that even if someone fell asleep by the fire, they would not burn the house down.

Jim beamed at him and said, “It’s only right that for every question we ask you, you get to ask us one. The world is very different now, huh?” He pointed at his mother and asked, “How did women dress where you were from? Like my mom?”

Khan was not sure that was entirely fair, since Winona had already asked him what felt like a hundred questions already. "Women, men, both ... long shirt-" He said and stood to show, starting by placing a hand on his chest, then bent down to just below his knee. "Women, men, both ... clothing ... light ... sun, jungle, desert, hot ... clothing, no hot."

“You’ll have to draw it sometime,” Jim mused, thinking of the figures in the temple. “Do you want to ask me something, Khan? Anything you want. Promise I’ll answer as best I can ... or let the older people answer if I don’t know.” He pointed at Winona and Chris.

“Not too old to give you Hell,” Chris said mildly, which just made it more dangerous somehow.

"How ... how, Jim hair, gold? How, skin ... pink?" Khan asked, having never seen fair skin or blonde hair in his time. But since coming across on the boat with Jim, had seen many people with fair skin and light hair. So how did it happen?

Jim rubbed a hand through said hair and said, “Nobody knows how exactly ... people from different places look different. You are from India, where most people have dark hair and darker skin, though not you. My family was from a place called Europe, where many people have fair or gold skin and blonde hair, like mine. Peoples native to this country, America, have redder skin and dark hair. They also don’t have facial hair.” He rubbed a little at his bristles, which needed a shave. “People look different all over the world, Khan.” He stepped closer to his friend and offered his arm to look at. “Do you like the difference?”

"Yes, new. Khan not see, past. Khan see, now. Many, many people." Khan said with a smile, not at
all concerned by this difference, but definitely fascinated by them. "How-" Khan considered how to put his question into words. "How big, land? Europe? America? ... map? Show map? Please?"

Chris stood and fetched down from a shelf a beautiful globe, made in France, and set it on the table. "I believe I can show you something even better, Khan. This is a globe, a map of the entire Earth. You see, the Earth is round, and the land floats on top of it, amidst the oceans. Come look."

Jim grinned, delighted at the idea and moved back to stand opposite of Chris, so he could look, too. "This is one of the new globes, isn’t it?"

"As recent as we could acquire," Chris said. "There’s still a lot empty on here."

For a healthy amount of time, Khan just stared at the globe. The idea that the earth was a circle, like the sun and moon completely melted his brain. "AMAZING!" He shouted abruptly and began to examine it in close detail, spinning it one direction, then another.

Jim nearly jumped a foot in the air at the shout, but then laughed aloud himself at the joy in Khan’s expression, as he examined the globe. "Would you like to see where we are now, Khan?" he asked.

"Yes, where ... where?" Khan asked, spinning the globe slowly, looking at so much land and water. "Show Khan, Jim home. Show Khan, temple." He said, wanting to visualize the difference.

Jim gently stilled the globe and moved it until the United States faced Khan. He gestured to the whole middle landmass of North America. "Jim country. United States." His fingers then drew a circle around the state. "Jim state. Iowa." And he picked up a pencil and pointed to about the middle of the state. "Jim home. Here. Middle of Iowa, middle of United States. Yes?"

"Iowa. Jim home." Khan said, marveling at how much land there was. He wanted to ask about the other regions, and what looked like lakes and rivers. He wanted to know everything. "Show ... show, Bones, home." He asked, since that was one of the last places they had been before arriving here.

Jim said, "Khan and Jim travel to Iowa from Bones home. I show you backward." He took the pencil and traced their route through the states all the way back to New York, New York. "Bones home. And before that, we sailed across the Atlantic Ocean." He traced the route of their ship back across the waters to- "India here. And Khan and Jim got to port like this." And he continued his trace back through their weeks on horseback to- "Khan home. Temple."

"Look!" Khan said, feeling that everyone in the room should be as excited as he was. "Jim, home." He pressed one finger where Jim had shown him. "Khan, temple." And pressed his finger from his other hand on the second location. "Land. Ocean. Very far. Big, big world."

"That is far," Chris agreed with a note of worry in his tone, considering how much faster they must prepare to get back. "The world is very large, Khan, and we still know so little about it. Do you want to see where Jim’s ancestors came from? His far family?"

"Yes, please." Khan smiled at Chris. "Where family ..." He paused, trying to think of a suitable word, "first home?"

So, Chris turned the globe and shows Khan Europe and attempted to explain how all of the Pike and Kirk relatives came over to America on ships, long before it was even semi-safe and made a home in the New World. He showed how all of them were a mix of blood from various places. He spun the globe here and there as he explained these details, showing Khan the various routes their ancestors traveled and where they settled.
"Amazing." Khan said, this time his tone was controlled, showing reverence for all those who must have come before. Spreading out across the world, settling and starting new lives. He listened carefully to Chris, absorbing much of the information. He asked about South America and Africa. He asked about large lakes and islands. He asked the names of oceans and how long it took to travel them. But it was a little past midnight when Khan felt he had asked enough questions for one evening and smiled at everyone. "Thank you, Chris. Thank you, Why-Nona. Thank you, Jim. Good. Khan, happy."

Jim had allowed Chris to take over most of the talking since they pulled out the globe, since Chris knew his geography so well and enjoyed showing it to other people. Besides, that way he got to sit back an enjoy Khan’s fascination with the world uninterrupted. The way his friend practically glowed throughout the whole discussion made Jim uncomfortably warm inside. But he did not allow himself to analyze and worry about it.

For his part, Christopher Pike had never had such an apt and focused pupil. He’d lost time completely in the telling of the world and felt disappointed that they were going to end. “It is late,” he said with a glance at Winona. “We can talk more later, Khan.”

"Yes, good. Thank you." Khan smiled. "Chris, Why-Nona travel with Jim and Khan, go, Khan temple. Long time, talk, learn. Very good. Very happy." He said, more then willing to share more of what he knew in trade for learning more from them.

"Yes, you are right." Winona said as she closed her notebook, but kept it at her side as she stood. It was even more precious to her now then ever. "Good night, Jim. Good night, Khan."

Jim leaned over and kissed his mother’s cheek. “Night, Mom.” He patted Chris on the back. “Night, Chris. Come on, Khan. I’ll help you get ready for bed.” He headed for the stairs, though he paused to let Khan say his goodnights.

"Good night. Good night." Khan said with a small, but respectful bow to both Chris and Winona. Then headed after Jim, up the stairs with a pleased look. "Jim, happy? Khan, happy." He said, hoping that Jim shared in his pleasure.

Jim laughed a bit at the eagerness of his friend and said, “Yes, I’m very happy, Khan. I haven’t smiled or laughed this much in years. You can ask Chris and my mom, they’ll tell you it’s true. And anytime Chris gets to talk like he’s speaking to a student makes him happy. He used to be a teacher.” He opened the door to his room and gestured Khan in first.

"Jim, good family." Khan said with a smile as he entered into Jim's room. Though he understood that Jim's father had died, he also understood that Chris had raised him, so that made him family. Blood was not a factor in his mind, nor his culture, seeing as how Khan himself had been raised by a village.

“Yeah, they really are,” Jim said with a hint of marvel. “Mom was pretty sad when my dad died, but after Chris came to help out, she started getting better. Her work is really important to her, too. There are prominent universities that put out mom’s work, but only under a man’s name. Chris pretty much brought me up more than mom. He taught me most of what I know. The rest, I basically taught myself or learned through experience.” He shook his head and seemed to dismiss the thought for the moment. “Want me to heat some water to wash with?”

"Water, wash face. No bath." Khan said, not feeling like he needed a full wash, but just enough to wash his face with before bed. "Khan, happy Jim home." He said, happy to be there, even if they were not staying long. But for now, he would be enjoying a bed indoors with his friend.
Jim looked Khan over carefully and said, “I don’t know. Khan smelly. Khan need wash.” He quirked one of his cheeky grins, wondering if Khan would catch on that he was joking or take him completely seriously. Either way, Jim enjoyed his friend’s reactions to things.

"Khan, smell?" Khan asked, in the habit of taking what Jim said to heart and as truth. He lifted his shirt and tucked his nose under the collar to take a sniff. He smelled a little like the grass and the tree they had laid under, but Khan considered that a pleasant smell. "Khan wash, Jim says."

Jim’s smile morphed into something fond, just a shade under goofy, and he stepped forward to sniff at Khan a little. “Jim wrong. Khan smell fine. Just wash face. Jim warm water for Khan.” He snagged the water pitcher and headed downstairs to fetch some water for their bowl.

"Yes, Jim." Khan said warmly, clearly willing to follow whatever direction was given to him. He watched Jim go to get water, but remained in the room, curiously looking over every detail of it. The books on a shelf, the mirror and dresser, even the rug on the floor, it interested him greatly to think that this was what Jim considered his home, these were his things.

Jim brought back up the pitcher, full of warm water, and poured some in the basin. He placed a towel and some soap by the basin, as well. “All ready for Khan. I’ll get your nightshirt.” He moved to fetch the garment from where he’d tossed their packs earlier. “We can wash everything before we set out again, at least.”

"Thank you, Jim." Khan said and went to the water bowl to first give his hands a wash. Once they were clean, he began to wash his face with water and soap, rinsing several times until he felt refreshed. "Good, wash." Khan said, drying his face and forearms with the towel before putting it aside. Feeling comfortable, Khan then began to undress so that he could change into his nightclothes and go to bed with Jim as planned.

Jim changed the water and washed his own hands and face, before changing himself into a comfortable nightshirt and heading for bed. He turned down the covers and crawled into the bed, glad for an actual mattress after so many nights of the hard ground. With a sigh, he settled himself down, head cushioned on his pillows. “Sleep well, Khan.”

Moving in next to Jim in bed, Khan settled on his side and smiled at his friend. "Good sleep. Jim." He said, then reached out under the blankets to find Jim's arm to hold, "Thank you, keep Khan close." He said, happy that he had been allowed to stay in his room with him, instead of left alone in another room.

Jim turned to face Khan and let their hands tangle, unused to being so close to someone in bed, outside of sex. “Are you lonely, Khan?” he asked, concerned that outside of Jim, his friend felt alone in the world. “You are always welcome with me. Just tell me when you want company, Khan.”

"Jim, best friend. Good friend." Khan said. While Jim had friends in cities all over the world, Khan only knew Jim, and his friends second hand. He had the horses, who he cared about dearly and spoke to as friends, but it was not the same as a human connection. Which is what he had with Jim, and since they had nearly been inseparable since Jim had discovered Khan in the temple, he continued to hold onto it as his most meaningful relationship in this new world.

Jim scooted closer and lightly put a hand on Khan’s upside shoulder. “I promise, Khan make more friends. Chris and Winona be good friends. I know my mom is asking you a million questions, but she’s a good person, too.” He did want Khan to build other relationships, so that he did not have a lopsided relationship deficit. “Khan have many friends before?”
"Yes, many friends. All village, friends. People bones, tomb, friends." He said, meaning those that
had been buried with him had been his friends too. "All gone." He said with a sigh. "Jim, friend.
Make new friends."

Jim asked softly, “Khan have wife? Kids?” He thought that a demi-God or just God should have at
least a few children, but knew that some religions had celibate Gods, who mostly abstained from all
sexual contact.

Never bothered by Jim’s questions, Khan simply smiled. "No wife. No husband. No babies." He had
sex through ceremonies of course, but the point of them were not to father children, as might be
expected from someone of his standing. "Friends." He said with a sigh, adjusting his head on the
pillow to get comfortable.

“Friends are good,” Jim said with a little nod at Khan. “Jim glad Khan best friend. Jim lucky.” He
squeezed Khan’s shoulder and dropped his hand back to rest near Khan’s own. “Sleep well, Khan.
Jim be here.”
Chapter 13

The home bustled for the next few days, as Jim, Chris and Winona put together the workings for an urgent expedition back to Khan’s temple. Jim made sure Khan was involved in the proceedings, particularly in selecting horses for the journey to New York. He made sure that Khan knew they would be stabled with Bones when they shipped overseas and not forced to make the trip. They also packed equipment for the journey, much of it newly purchased, as well.

But they finished their end a few days before Chris and Winona finalized their pieces of the planning, so after breakfast on a sunny morning, Jim asked, “Khan, what do you think of us packing a picnic and going for a tour of the whole farm? I haven’t done more than say hello to Sam, either.”

"Yes?" Khan perked up a bit at the suggestion of going out for a bit. "See farm? See, brother?" He had helped the family where he could, but had mostly stayed out of the way, looking at pictures in an encyclopedia or spending time with the horses.

“Yes, see farm. Talk to Sam. If we can catch him, of course. He’s probably out in one of the fields. But we’ll go by there. What do you say? Let’s pack a lunch together. I think we can make some nice sandwiches.” Jim was rather enthused about the idea himself, wanting a chance to show off his home to his friend.

"Yes, we go." Khan said, excited by this prospect. He enjoyed the land. And right now since they were not traveling, he did not feel rushed in his enjoyment of it. Whereas soon they would be on the road again and all the new sights would pass within seconds, without being able to properly experience them.

Jim grinned and polished off his breakfast, running his homemade biscuit through the last of the gravy. They were up a bit later than Winona and Chris, who were already busy finishing up their preparation in the study. He carried his plate to the sink and washed it quickly, before heading to look through their food stores and choose some items for lunch. There were apples and some thick bread and preserves and some jerky for himself, along with a couple of slices of Chris’ rhubarb pie. All together, this made for a full picnic basket, to which Jim added a canteen full of water from the pump. “Want a snack to take with us?”

"This, good." Khan said, keeping close at Jim's side while his friend raided the pantry. "Jim and Khan, walk?" He asked, looking out the kitchen window to the farm and the sky, checking to ensure it would be a pleasant day for them.

“Yeah. We’ll take the path to Sam’s part of the property, which runs through cornfields on one side and the only wheat field on the other,” Jim said. “We can go to their house and see their animals, too. Sam keeps a lot more animals than mom and Chris. After all, his is the working side of the farm.” He offered Khan his free hand. “Let’s get hats first.”

"Corn. Wheat. Animals." Khan echoed back, counting on seeing the things Jim was promising him. But he took Jim's hand to follow, trusting his friend and his suggestions for the walk.

Jim led them to the front door and fetched a brown hat for Khan and a white hat for himself, carefully making sure that Khan’s was situated jauntily. “There.” He opened the door and ushered Khan out, before turning down the road that led behind the stables and took another left to continue on a narrow, but well-worn path toward Sam’s house. In a few moments, they were surrounded on both sides by fields. “So, the plants on the left are corn. Want to go look at them?”
"Yes, corn." Khan said, walking with Jim down the dirt path. He had seen a corn cob from McCoy and during dinner the night before with the Kirk family, but this was different. The plant stems were quite long and held more then just one ear of corn. "Tall!"

Jim laughed and said, “They sure are! That’s why they’re a perfect place to play tag. It’s easy to get lost in there and avoid getting caught.” He wandered over to a plant with a well-developed ear at waist height and sets down his picnic basket. “Here’s the edible part of the corn.” He carefully peeled down the sides so Khan could see the cob inside.

"Yes, corn. Many, many corn." Khan said, rubbing his hands over the large, firm stocks. They were quite strong to support so much weight.

“Do you like them?” Jim asked, thinking his friend certainly seemed to. “They really go well in Iowa. There are a lot of farms like ours that grow it out here, but we pride ourselves on having the best. At least when Chris is cooking with it ... and probably Aurelan, too. It’s been too long since I had her cornbread. I hope they have some!” He figured that nobody could outdo either of their cooking.

"Yes, good plants. Healthy. Happy. Strong. Tall. Like sun." Khan said, petting his hand over a few more as he walked along the edge of the field. "What is- Aurelan?"

“Sam’s wife,” Jim said. “She works hard on the farm, but she also finds time to paint and do other art, too. Not to mention handle two kids ... my nephews- Peter and George. He’s named after my father, as well as his own father. Sam’s first name is actual George, like our father, but he always went by his middle name, Samuel. Sam for short. But little George goes by George. They’re six and three years old and real handfuls for their parents.”

"Husband. Wife. Children." Khan said with a nod, interested in meeting the extended part of the family, and not just Jim's brother.

Jim did not quite understand why Khan repeated it all back, but nodded and said, “Yep, Sam’s making sure the Kirk family continues on. It’s a relief because I’ll probably never manage it. When my grandfather was alive, my dad’s dad, he started teaching Sam about the farm before I was even born. He always wanted someone to carry on the place. So, I’m glad he’s doing that, too. I remember my granddad a bit ... he was the only one who paid me much attention when I was really little. Fortunately, Chris came along before he passed away. The Kirk family has a cemetery on the property, too.”

"Hm." Khan considered, understanding that something else was a feature on the family land, but could not get it from context. "What is- cemetery?"

“Oh, right. Huh. That’s an interesting question,” Jim said. “It’s a relatively new tradition, really. A way to memorialize those who have gone before. Every culture is slightly different. In Christian culture, people were buried near the places where they worshiped God to begin with, but now, there are too many people for that, so people are being buried in cemeteries. I’ll show you the one on our land later.”

As always, Khan listened carefully to what Jim was saying. "Dead, people. Together? Buried? Ground?" That made sense. Family groups were buried together, if they died together, but were otherwise put just about anywhere. Unless they were like Khan and wanted to be treated with extra care and respect. But not everyone earned that sort of love in their lifetime.

“Yes, that’s right,” Jim said. “And we put up markers with their names and date of birth and death to memorialize them. So we don’t forget, even a long time from now.” He patted Khan on the arm and
than tugged at him lightly. “Come on, let’s keep walking. There’s a lot to see.”

Khan was curious about this concept of a family cemetery and wanted to see it eventually. But kept close to Jim as they continued to walk the path along the rows of corn. "Show, more."

Jim took Khan’s hand again and moved them back along the path, strolling in an easy fashion. Eventually, he led him into the right field and stopped at a very different type of crop. “This is wheat. The most common crop in the US, I think.” He ran his hands through the tops and pulled one off to show Khan the seeds. “A staple food. We make bread out of it, mostly, but you can do a lot of things with wheat, too.”

Khan took a look at the stem and the seeds, "Eat?" He asked, putting a few into his mouth. But it was grainy and unpleasant, so he almost instantly dragged his fingers over his tongue to get the taste off. "No good."

Jim slapped his hand over his mouth to cover a grin and stifle a laugh. “No, not raw, Khan. You need to cook it to make it edible. Just like corn. It’s not any good raw, either.” He lightly reached up to flick a few stray seeds away from Khan’s cheek. “You’re such a great person to have around.”

Modern foods sure did take a lot of effort. Corn and wheat could not be planted and simply eaten out of the ground. They took preparation. They had to be broken down into secondary foods before people could consume them. That seemed like a lot of work. But bread was good, as Khan had learned to enjoy rolls with dinner and toast with breakfast.

Jim noted the expression on Khan’s face remained grumpy and said, “We’ll get you something better tasting to eat in a minute. Want some water to wash out your mouth?” He offered up the canteen to the other man, taking off the top.

"Please, yes. Water good." Khan said and accepted the canteen to drink from. First a small sip to rinse his mouth, then another for a proper drink. "Thank you, good."

Jim nodded and took his own sip. “These are clever. People have come up with ways to carry water since they first learned how to make things.” He sealed the canteen, took Khan’s hand and continued on the route, along more rows of corn and wheat, until they finally came to a crossroads, where there was a break in the wheat, though the corn continued. He stopped there and set down his pack, letting go of Khan. “Wait here,” he said and quickly began to scale a grand tree in front of them like a monkey. In another moment, a small sea of nuts began to fall from the branches.

“What is-?” Khan said with a laugh as nuts rained down. He stepped away to keep from getting struck in the head with them, but bent over to pick a few up when they rolled closer to his feet. Jim came down a few moments later and said, “Walnuts! They’re delicious, after you crack open the shell, of course.” He took out a small knife and used the handle to break the shell of one, opening it up and exposing the meat inside. With care, he extracted the delicious pieces and handed them to Khan. “Try these.”

"Eat?" Khan asked, wanting to confirm this time before putting things into his mouth. When he got the go-ahead, he began to eat the nut, enjoying the taste and texture. "Good, yes ... Khan like, good ... wall-nut."

Jim cracked open another one for himself and crunched that down contentedly. “These trees are native to Iowa. Much older than any of the Kirk family. My grandfather kept the nicer ones in place, especially since they give such a good crop of nuts for the family to use. Shall we take some to Sam’s house?”
"Yes, we take." Khan said and bent down to collect the nuts into his arms. "Good, food. Thank you, tree."

Jim opened the basket and pulled out a cloth sack. "We always keep one of these in the basket to collect nuts in." He held it open for Khan to put the nuts in. "Want to eat a few more? They're delicious. I could snack on them all day."

"Yes." Khan said, though dumped his handful of walnuts into the bag. He continued to pick them up off the ground, putting them in the bag hand over hand, until there were only a few left. These they would eat. The rest were a gift for Sam and his family.

Jim closed the bag and put it back into the picnic basket. He offered his knife to Khan. "Prepare nuts for Jim and Khan?" he asked. His friend did like to try things for himself, such as the aborted wheat experiment. "The kids will love the nuts. Though they sometimes like to throw them more than eat them."

Using Jim's knife while walking along again, Khan cracked and pried open the walnut with some success. He knocked out what he could into his hand, offering the pieces to Jim to go first. There was still more to dig out of the shell, but he did not want to accidentally drop the easy bits and waste them.

Jim popped them in his mouth with a "Thank you, Khan," and chewed with a contented expression. "These were always my favorite snack growing up. These trees weren't as important to me as my oak, but I always considered them good friends, too." He pointed to small house up ahead. "Looks like smoke's coming out of the chimney, so we may catch Aurelan at home."

"Good food. Good trees." Khan said, though his head was down, focused on picking out every little bit of the brain-looking chunks of nut. The shells were slowly dropped in his wake, but the rest made it into his mouth, or into Jim's hands for consumption.

They shared the nuts to the door, and Jim made sure they had left no shells on the porch, before politely knocking.

In a moment, a red-haired woman in her mid-thirties with bright green eyes answered. Her practical garments were covered in flour, and she carried a bowl in the arm she had not opened the door with. She took one look at Jim and made a delighted noise. "Jim! You scallywag! We've been waiting for you to visit for days! Come here and give me a kiss!"

A little abashed, Jim stepped up and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "Hello, Aurelan. I'm sorry for taking so long to drop by. We've been busy since we got here. I want you to meet my friend, Khan. He's been staying with us."

"Hello, Aurelan." Khan said with a small bow of his head, and his wrists pressed together in his usual style of greeting. "Gift you, wall-nuts." Khan said with a smile, wanting to present the gift right away.

"Mr. Khan," Aurelan said, noting the gesture with a slightly curious smile, and extended her hand to him. "A pleasure to meet you. It's so nice of you to bring us walnuts. They are the boys' favorites."

Everyone wanted to shake hands. Men. Women. Family. Strangers. Friends. The custom was still strange to Khan, no matter how many times he did it. But he gently shook Aurelan's hand all the same. Though he did find her hair quite distracting. He had never seen red hair before. It looked marvelous.
“Come on in, please,” Aurelan said and stepped back, gesturing with her hand. “I’m just doing my weekly baking. You can try some of the cornbread first. And I’ll pack you some to take back with you, as well.”

Jim nearly did a little dance of joy at the news. He loved Aurelan’s cornbread more than almost any treat. “If Sam hadn’t married you first, I’d have done it myself,” he said in thanks, making her laugh. “Can we give you a hand while we’re here?”

“If you could shell some peas, I’d be grateful,” Aurelan said, leading them into the kitchen, which adjoined the main room of the house. There were only three total rooms- one main bedroom, a room for the boys and the kitchen/living area. It was much less ostentatious than the home Winona, Chris and Jim lived in, being the first house on the property. But it suited the down-to-Earth attitude of the people who lived there.

“Of course,” Jim said. “Khan has never done that before.”

"Smell, good." Khan said as he followed Jim to the kitchen. "Jim-" He said softer, "hair ... hair, pretty. Red ... copper ..." He said, sharing his excitement at something so new to his eyes.

Aurelan cast another curious glance at Khan, as she set down her bowl and went to fetch the peas for podding.

“Yes, isn’t she beautiful, Khan? Red hair is unusual even here,” Jim said. “You’ll see that George has the same color hair, but Peter is blonde, like most of us.” After setting down their picnic basket, he pulled out the bag and offered it to Khan. “Please give this to Aurelan.”

"Pretty. Beautiful." Khan agreed. He took the bag from Jim and after seeing that Aurelan was not coming back immediately, Khan followed her further into the kitchen. "Aurelan. Gift. For family. Wall-nuts." He said, presenting the bag to her with a smile.

Aurelan had just finished filling a bowl with peas, but beamed at Khan as he approached. “Thank you, Mr. Khan,” she said and carefully took the bag of walnuts, opening it and looking inside. “That’s a very generous amount you brought us. I’ll have to make sure you return with as much cornbread.” She carefully set the bag aside, showing that it was appreciated. “Will you please carry this bowl of peas to the table for me? I’ll bring another bowl.”

"Yes, good. Understand." Khan said and took the bowl of peas from here to return to the table where Jim had put down their picnic basket. He set the bowl on the table, though did not know what he was supposed to do about it now. These were peas, he understood. But what were they meant to do with them?

Aurelan followed after him and set an empty bowl on the table, too. “So, tell me a little about yourself, Mr. Khan.”

“Please, just call him Khan,” Jim said, washing his hands at the sink. “Come wash, Khan, and then you can tell Aurelan about yourself.” He wondered what his sister-in-law would make of his friend.

"Khan, wash?" Khan asked, feeling he was plenty clean, but followed Jim's instruction. He washed his hands, like Jim did. Though felt that the time for washing his hands should have been before he shook hands. Still, many things did not make sense to him, but he simply followed through with Jim's example. "Jim and Khan, travel from ... from India." Khan said, having to remember what country Jim and the others called it. "Travel, by horse. Travel, by boat. Long time, travel here. Jim's home. Very nice. Meet you. Good."
Jim moved to the table and said, “Please sit next to me, Khan, and we’ll shell peas for Aurelan.” He
took a seat and began to break open the pods, dumping the peas into the empty bowl. “I met Khan
on my last adventure. He traveled all the way home with me, though we’re going back in the next
few days.”

Aurelan said, “Well, welcome to the Kirk farm, Khan. I’m sorry that we won’t have a chance to get
to know you better. However, Jim, you best bring all of yourselves over for dinner before you all
leave again.”

Sitting next to Jim, and observing him a moment, Khan then placed his hand in the bowl of peas and
began to crack them open like Jim did. He wondered what was wrong with eating the outside green
part, but was not going to risk trying it like he had with the wheat. It seemed like a lot of effort for
something so small. Just like the walnuts. And making grain into something else, to make bread.
Everything took a great deal of time.

“I promise,” Jim said. “I’ll have Chris bring over a few items, too, since my cooking is only fit for
the road.”

Aurelan snorted delicately and said, “You could be an excellent cook if you put your mind to it, Jim.
Now, would either of you like something to drink? I should have offered before.”

“Drink, coffee? Please? Yes?” Khan asked, uncertain if this was something that everyone had in
their house, or not. Khan was accustomed to drinking it once, even twice a day. Though the modern
coffee he had still was not like the kind he had at home, but it was still satisfying.

Aurelan chuckled and said, “I see that all of the men around here are alike. Same for you, Jim?”

“If you don’t mind, Aurelan,” Jim said, shelling peas like a pro. “Khan likes his pitch black.”

Aurelan nodded and went to pour some from the pot that was always kept simmering over a small
stove. “So, how do you like the Kirk farm, Khan?” she asked, as she expertly added sugar and milk
to Jim’s. “Have you had a chance to explore?”

“Kirk farm house, very nice. Kirk farm ... corn and wheat, healthy and good. Bull, good too.” Khan
said, doing his best to talk about the things he had experienced so far. "Chris cook good food. Jim
family, good people."

“So, Jim hasn’t given you the complete tour yet,” Aurelan said. “Jim, you must make sure Khan
sees my milk goats.” They were a favorite of hers, providing milk that made lovely cheeses.

“Of course,” Jim said. “We haven’t had a chance to see much before today, and I want to make sure
that Khan sees it all.” He picked up his cup as Aurelan set it before him, inhaling the coffee smell.
“Thank you.”

Aurelan set Khan’s mug before him, as well. “I hope you like my coffee, Khan. It’s not as strong as
Winona’s and Chris’ versions, but I think it’s more flavorful.”

"Thank you, coffee. Aurelan." Khan said with a smile and took up the cup. He gave it a sniff, then a
slow sip. No, it was not strong, but it was smooth, which was more like what Khan was accustomed
to. "Yes, good. Good coffee. Thank you."

“Sounds like your coffee got more approval than the rest of ours,” Jim said with a laugh, even as he
returned to shelling peas. “Are you cooking these tonight?”

“I’m using about half for a pea soup,” Aurelan said with a coy smile over her shoulder, knowing
how much Jim loved that, too.

“That would be nice to have when we come over,” Jim said, not even pretending not to be desiring the dish. “Something else new for Khan.”

“Well, as long as it’s new for Khan,” Aurelan teased and laughed with Jim.

Khan continued to enjoy the coffee, taking a small break from shelling peas. But after his cup was half done, he returned to the work, popping the shells open and making sure the peas ended up in the bowl. "Aurelan-" Khan began, making his attempt at starting conversation. "You have boys, you have Sam? Good home. Happy?"

Aurelan said, “Oh yes, two boys, both handfuls, like all Kirk men.” Her laugh sounded like a peal of bells. “They’re my pride and joy, though. I didn’t know a person could be this happy with everyday life. I even find time for my art. I am very happy here. And you, Khan, are you glad to be traveling with Jim?”

"Good. Happy Aurelan." Khan said with a smile, pleased to hear and sense her joy second hand. "Khan happy, Jim and Khan travel. Good friend." He said, not sure what else he was allowed to say about where he was from, or why they were going back. But being with Jim did make him happy, that was truth enough.

“Jim is a good friend,” Aurelan agreed. “He will stand by you in storms and blue skies.” She opened the oven door to look at her cornbread and said, “Oh, lovely, this is done.” She pulled out the pan and set it atop the counter. “Now, don’t you go getting into this until it cools down some, James T. Kirk.”

“Aww, Aurelan,” Jim said with a slight pout in her direction. “I won’t be bad in front of my guest.”

"Hot. Bread, hot." Khan agreed, but gave a few deep breaths afterwards. "Smell, good. Very good." He said, thinking that he would like cornbread very much.

“And it tastes even better,” Jim said heartily. “With just a bit of butter.” He was already salivating at the very idea, not to mention the smell.

Aurelan put in another batch of bread to bake and smiled at Jim. “Just be patient, Jim. I’ll serve you as soon as it’s ready. Have you never had cornbread, Khan?”

"No. Khan, no cornbread, past." Khan said, doing his best to say that he had never had it before, in the present or in the past. "Smell, good." He said again, but continued to work, though gently scolded Jim. "Jim, do work. Do job. Peas." He said, suggesting that he wasn't keeping up.

Aurelan snorted a laugh at Jim’s expression on being scolded and said, “It’s true, Jim, you are falling behind.” She carried some butter to the table, along with a couple of plates for their use.

“Fine,” Jim said and began to speed through the shelling of the peas, making sure they all fell into the bowl. “I’ll catch up with you, Khan.” He lightly jostled Khan’s arm in play.

"Khan and Jim, do job." Khan said, still going at the same pace. He really didn't know anything about people being competitive. Not in games. Or in work. So he did not think of it as anything, for Jim to start rushing through.

Aurelan arched an eyebrow at Jim and Khan, amused at the interaction between them. “So, tell me what you brought back from your adventures this time, Jim,” she said, as she cut them each a generous portion of cornbread and carried it to the table. “Do wait another moment before you eat
“Yes, ma’am,” Jim said and launched into a quick description of all of the pieces he brought back from India. About half-way through, he took a quick breath and asked, “May I show Khan how to eat his cornbread now?”

Aurelan laughed at the eagerness in Jim’s tone and said, “Yes, Jim, I think it’s ready now.”

Jim turned to his friend and said, “Time to eat cornbread now.” He picked up the butter knife and lightly spread some butter on the top of his slice. Handing the knife to Khan, he said, “You try some, Khan.”

"Yes?" Khan fished shelling the pod that was in his hand, then reached for the cornbread. "Smell, good." He said, wanting to try it just as it was, but followed Jim's instruction, taking the knife to butter the top of it, which began to melt into the bread almost immediately. "Eat, now?"

“Eat now,” Jim agreed fervently and took a big bite. Instantly, his eyes closed, and he made a noise normally considered inappropriate outside of the bedroom. The bread practically melted on his tongue, just a perfect blend of savory and sweet that pleased him immensely. “Oh, you’ve made it even better, Aurelan. Never leave me.”

The praise made Aurelan color with delight, even as she continued to laugh at Jim’s antics. “You are something else, Jim Kirk. I never get tired of your visits. They’re always too short.”

Taking a bite as well, Khan made a few soft noises of pleasure as well before purring softly, easily taking one bite after another without giving rest to breathe. It was so good.

“Khan says he agrees,” Jim said, watching as Khan devoured his piece even faster than Jim did. “And who can blame him? This is delicious.”

Aurelan leaned forward and asked after a moment, “Are you purring, Khan?”

Khan smiled at her as if nothing were amiss. "Yes, Khan purr. Very good. Good corn bread. Thank you. Enjoy." He said, pleased to know that Jim had already made arrangements to take some home with them.

“It’s just the way Khan expresses happiness, Aurelan,” Jim explained with a fond smile at his friend. “I know it’s unusual, but it’s a great way to know when he likes something.” He took another large bite of his bread.

“Well, just for that kind display of how much you like my bread, you get more,” Aurelan declared and cut off another large slice for Khan, setting it in front of him and ignoring Jim’s outraged expression.

"Yes?" Khan smiled at her, something innocent in his features as if to suggest that he had never been hurt or harmed by anyone. And yet, his eyes also held certain wisdom, living as a leader, experiencing many things in his lifetime, and indeed, having lived a very long life. All it meant, was that there was a sense of purity in his happiness. It was never forced. "Very good. Khan like. Thank you." He said and buttered the bread again as Jim had showed him and began to eat once more, purring softly as soon as the bread hit his tongue.

Jim grumbled a little about her playing favorites, but finished off shelling the last few peas, before polishing off his own piece of cornbread. “There we are, Aurelan, a bowl full of peas for you to work more magic with.”
“Thank you both. Jim. Khan.” Aurelan took the bowl of peas and placed a wrapped cornbread on the table for them to take home to share with Chris and Winona. “Now, off with the both of you as soon as Khan finishes his bread. I need to get the washing started, and you’ve got the rest of the farm to explore.”

Only now understanding that Jim was not getting a second piece of bread, Khan stopped eating in order to share the remainder of his piece with Jim. "Good, eat." He said, offering it to Jim. "Jim and Khan, friends. See, farm."


Aurelan said, “Well, I suppose I can offer you some to share for the road, too,” and handed over a smaller wrapped article to Jim. “Go on now.”

Seeing that this was a little more fair, and since Jim insisted, Khan finished the last of his cornbread with ease. "Thank you, Aurelean. Good food. Thank you." He said as he stood and offered her a small bow of his head, understanding that they were to go soon.

Jim stood and gave Aurelan a hug, saying, “We’ve enjoyed our visit a lot, sis. I promise that we’ll have time for a dinner before we leave again. All four of us.”

Aurelan hugged back and said, “It was great to see you again, Jim.” She stepped back and then offered a hug to Khan, too. “Lovely to meet you, too, Khan. Any friend of Jim’s is a friend of mine. Thank you for helping me with the peas, both of you.”

"Hug?” Khan questioned the gesture slightly, not accustomed to this being offered. "New friend." Khan agreed and gave a gentle, maybe even shy hug, unsure of what level of intimacy it was meant to represent. "See, again. Good."

Aurelan gave him a brief, firm squeeze, noting Khan’s lack of understanding about the hug. “New friend,” she agreed and stepped back from the hug. “And I hope we’ll soon be good friends. Now, please enjoy the rest of your day.”

“Thank you, Aurelan,” Jim said, packing up the cornbread and picking up the basket to carry with them. He gave her a quick peck on the cheek and said “Come on, Khan, we’ll go look at the animals next.”

Khan however did not follow this custom of kissing Aurelan, but instead smiled once more and followed after Jim. "Farm, animal. Jim and Khan, see."

“There are some young lambs in the pasture,” Aurelan said. “You should take Khan to see them.”

“Good idea, Aurelan,” Jim said and waved goodbye as they exited out the back. “Come on, Khan, let’s start there. It’s always fun to see the little guys.” He headed toward a paddock that housed a small herd of sheep, including a few young lambs. “Aww, look at them,” he said and climbed over the fence, heading into the herd.

"Sheep !" Khan said with a smile, and climbed over the fence as well. "Hello friends. Yes, yes, hello." Khan continued to beam as he watched small lambs bound around, jumping up in the air and kicking out in play. Khan considered all forms of life his friends, and was always happy to meet new animals. Or trees. Or people. Everyone, really. Except for the Marcusus. He had not met them yet, but did not consider them friends. And never would.
Jim chose a clean spot and sat in the grass, letting the sheep get used to him. Eventually, they wandered over to sniff at him and let him pet their coats, which would be sheared soon in response to the warming temperatures. One of the lambs went bounding past him, and he laughed at the sheer exuberance. “Did you have sheep like these, Khan?”

"Hello-” Khan knelt down as well, lightly reaching out to touch the thick wool whenever one of them passed by. "Very nice. Fat sheep. Khan sheep ... horns." He said, "Brown sheep. Black sheep.”

“Yeah, only the rams have horns on this breed,” Jim said. “And he’s prone to butting people if he’s in here, so he has his own paddock to patrol around in. Most fearless sheep I have ever seen.” He shook his head and rose from his spot. “Want to see more?”

"Yes. Jim and Khan see farm.” Khan said, rising again. The sheep were friendly enough, even curious, but not socialized to cuddle or seek out human attention. Khan understood and respected that. "What animal. Show.”

Jim easily climbed out of the paddock and retrieved their picnic basket, before extending a hand to Khan again. "How about Aurelan’s goats? They are very social and should also have kids right now. I’ll have to make sure our food is very safely out of their reach. They’re the darndest rascals.”

"Yes, Jim and Khan go.” Khan said, holding Jim's offered hand to follow his lead. Though some modern gestures were awkward for him, Khan did enjoy holding Jim's hand. He liked his friend and wanted to feel close to him as often as possible.

Jim led the way through the barnyard, heading for the small goat dairy that Aurelan kept and was justifiably proud of. There were about six goats in her small herd, though they were an added three kids bouncing around today. “Oh, look at the little mischief makers. They’re all innocence on the outside—” he paused that sentence as one went bounding right into a second and sent the smaller kid sprawling. “Actually, they don’t even pretend to be good. I’ll put the basket somewhere safe, if you want to say hello.”

"Goats! ” Khan laughed and entered the enclosure. Though goats and sheep were related, the goats were far more curious and interested in Khan. "Hello-” Khan said, greeting one of the mother goats who gave Khan a long, hard look. She bleated loudly at him, and Khan just laughed, rubbing her forehead with his fingers.

Jim walked in after Khan, easily hopping the fence. “Hey everyone,” he said, kneeling and holding out an apple he’d brought in with him. This brought the attention of several kids, and he took a bite out of the apple to offer to one. The little goat snagged the apple piece and crunched it down noisily, even as Jim took another bite out, before dropping the piece in his hand to give to a smaller, shier kid.

Thinking that Khan must have food too, one of the goats came up and started to nibble at his fingers. "I do not have food. These are my fingers." Khan chuckled, but also willingly allowed the goat as he continued to half gnaw on him.

Jim tossed a piece of apple to Khan to share with his goat friends, even as he repelled attempts by other goats to get the entire apple from his hand. “No, bad goats,” he scolded, but with laughter in his tone and no real firmness. “Maybe you can help Aurelan name all the little guys,” he said. “She’ll definitely keep the girls.”

"Here, chew on this instead. ” Khan offered up a piece of apple in front of the goat's eyes. The goat instantly stocked trying to suck and chew on Khan's fingers and began to chomp down on the apple.
"You see, much better." Khan said, then added, "Goat, good. No bad."

“They’re greedy little beggars,” Jim said, holding his apple way up high as a goat bounced next to him, trying to get at it. “They don’t want to share.” He managed to snag another piece to toss to one of the more patient mother goats. “Have you drunk goat’s milk?”

"Drink goat? Milk? No. Cheese. Hm-" Khan then mimed something that was to be eaten with the tips of the fingers because it tended to crumble and fall away. "Goat ... milk" He then mimed with both hands, how to milk a goat, then used the palms of his hands to show crushing something into a paste. "Cheese."

“Cheese!” Jim agreed. “Cheese. Yum! On bread. And just to eat.” He tossed the core for the little goats to butt heads about, laughing at their antics. “Aurelan milks them-" he mimed the same motion Khan had just showed him “every morning. We drink the milk, too. Very good.”

Khan laughed and smiled at Jim, thinking the idea of drinking the milk was a funny idea. Eating the cheese, yes. That was good. But drinking the milk? "Khan, goat milk ... bath!" He tried to explain.

“Bath? You took baths in goat milk?” Jim asked, wrinkling his nose at the idea. “Why?” He began to playfully tickle one of the goat’s ears, making her shake her head and bleat at him a little.

"Clean. Good. Good skin. Good smell." Khan considered, looking at his own arms, seeing he did not have an example to give, then approached Jim. "Heal skin, good." He said, indicating to the small scars or burn marks and similarly affected damaged skin would be healed by taking milk baths.

Jim looked at his arms and said, “Huh, I didn’t know that. I don’t think we have enough goats to take baths. But I might have to consider that for later.” He patted Khan on the arm. “Ready to go see some big horses, if Sam doesn’t have them all out in the field?”

"Yes, we go." Khan said, though gave the goats one last bit of attention. "Good-bye, friends." He said, and gave one of the dominant females a friendly scratch behind the ears.

Jim fetched their basket after exiting the fence and headed for the large barn, hoping at least old Tucker would be in the paddock adjoining the barn. He was a big drafter, nearing his 26th birthday and blind in one eye. His once dapple gray coat had faded to a dull gray, but he still gamely pulled a plow when needed, though his steps were slow and a bit stiff now. Both of the kids loved him, especially because he gave rides and allowed them to hang off his head and neck and sides with great patience. Jim had an apple with his name on it.

“Tucker!?" he called as they rounded the barn, and a deep whinny answered. He tugged lightly at Khan’s hand and burst into an easy trot. “Tucker!” Another call, and the old draft came into view, ambling toward them at a shuffling jog and whickering his greetings.

"Oh, how marvelous. He is a giant!" Khan stared, sharing Jim's love for the horse, even though Khan had just met him. Khan had never seen a horse this size before. The horses he knew were like Sunset or Sunrise, sleek frames and strong hearts built for endurance over sand and rock. But the horse before him was solid. A boulder, with four legs.

Jim climbed the fence, carrying two apples, having chosen to give Tucker his, as well. He hustled over to greet his old friend, wrapping his arms around his neck as the horse whickered and snuffled at Jim’s back. “Hi, buddy. How are you?” He patted the strong neck and stepped back to Tucker’s good eye side. “I want you to meet a friend of mine, Tucker. This is Khan. Khan, this is Tucker. He’s a draft horse.”
"Hello, friend." Khan said, standing on the rails of the fence at first, before climbing over to stand next to the large animal. "Handsome man. You have worked hard a long time. And have a good memory. You know Jim. You remember him. He is a good friend."

Tucker turned his head and sniffed at this new person, who spoke in a strange, but soothing, way to him. He accepted his presence with a low snort and a light bump with his muzzle.

"Want to give Tucker an apple, Khan? It’s the easiest way to make him your best friend," Jim said and handed over one of the two he carried. "Just be careful, he can accidentally take a big chomp of your hand."

"Apple." Khan said and took a large bite of the apple so that the horse had an idea of what he had, but also to help split the fruit so that it was easier to eat. "Gift, new friend. Tucker." Khan said, offering one section of the apple at a time to the horse.

Tucker sniffed at the apple and delicately plucked it off of Khan’s palm, crunching and drooling happily at his treat. He nudged at this new person’s shoulder lightly, accepting his companionship with his normal calmness.

"Tucker was brought to the farm when I was a little kid," Jim said. "No idea where mom got him. She refused to tell us. Kept saying the horse fairy brought him." He chuckled at the idea and stroked Tucker’s neck, unafraid although he was now on his blind side. "He still likes giving rides, if you want to go for a spin."

"Tucker, Jim's brother." Khan said, giving the horse a friendly scratch under his chin before offering him the second piece of the split apple. "Handsome." Khan continued to deliver praises in his own language, using his other hand to stroke his neck and shoulders slowly.

"Jim’s horse brother," Jim agreed with a thoughtful nod. "I learned how to plow with Tucker. He was very patient when I accidentally steered wrong, even when I kept having to repeat rows to make them straight." He lightly stroked the velvet of Tucker’s nose with his knuckles. "I also learned to ride on his back. Very hard to fall off."

"Good brother." Khan said with a smile and moved to the horse’s side, still visible to his good eye. Khan slid his hands down Tucker's back and shoulders, and laughed with delight at his fluffy feet. "You walk on clouds. Like the Lord of Horses. A good heart."

"Have you never seen a horse with feathers?" Jim asked and knelt to lightly run a hand through the long hairs above and around Tucker’s right fore-hoof. "These are called feathers. Hair above hoof is feather. Yes?" He leaned into Tucker’s leg, and the horse turned to lightly bump his head with a gentle muzzle, before licking at his hair.

"Feathers? Horse?" That was strange. But Khan had come to accept that English was strange, as Jim had admitted to it being so on several occasions. "Good. Pretty." Khan watched Jim with his horse-brother. "Tucker give kiss."

"I know ... English is weird. But it’s a fun term," Jim said with a chuckle, even as he lightly batted at Tucker’s nose as the horse slobbered all over his head. "Give him another apple piece before he eats my hair, Khan. I shouldn’t have washed with that fruity stuff."

"Tucker, apple. Gift." Khan said and offered the last piece of the apple he had. He offered it to the horse but continued to speak to him. "You probably miss Jim when he goes away. But you would not like where we go. The four horses that traveled with us did not like the trip. They came across the ocean. I think, you would not like it either. But your brother Jim is safe."
Jim could understand pieces of what Khan was saying and thought that he was telling Tucker that their trips were not fun. He snorted a little and said, “Tucker is happy here on the farm. He has two younger friends- Jumbo and Rawhide. They’re both drafter geldings, too, but a lot younger, so they do the hard work now. Tucker has earned a retirement to pasture most of the time.” He watched the drafter crunch his way through another apple and stood, patting his friend’s neck. “Khan want ride?”

"Ride, big horse? Ride, Tucker?” Khan perked up, having missed this offer the first time, as he had been quite fixated on the feathers and the massive legs of the horse. "Yes. Jim and Khan, ride?"


Tucker whickered at Jim again and lightly nibbled at his shirt.

“See, he says yes,” Jim said.

Khan tilted his head to the side, observing Jim and Tucker. "He says, give him more treats." But Khan smiled and patted his hand along Tucker's shoulder. "Gentle. Ride."

“I promise, more apple for Tucker later,” Jim said, understanding all of what Khan said that time. “Go on, see what it’s like to ride a drafter.” He stepped back from Tucker and into the horse’s line of sight again, nodding to Khan. “Do you need a hand up?”

"Tucker, I want to be as tall as you are." Khan said as he spread his hands over the large grey back of the drafter. "I will not hurt you, we are new friends." Khan said, grasping a handful of mane as he pulled himself up. The movement was fast, but he did not land heavily on Tucker's back, as he did not want to put unnecessary pressure on his aged body.

Jim smiled as he watched Khan elegantly and gently pulled himself on Tucker’s back, showing great care with the elder horse. It warmed his insides even more toward his friend.

Tucker lifted his head and pricked his ears up in excitement, enjoying the idea of going for a ride. He might have been an elderly horse, but he still had his youthful excitement about going for a ride. Whickering, he waited for his new rider to give him a nudge.

"Yes?” Khan smiled, and patted his neck. He gave a small squeeze with his knees, encouraging Tucker to move forward. "Show me around, Tucker. The world looks much differently from your height."

Tucker moved forward with a prance in his step that harkened back to his younger days. He didn’t push himself as much as he would have in the past, but still moved with an easy grace. His long strides carried them around the pasture in quick fashion, and he even kicked out a time or two in sheer exuberance.

Jim loved seeing signs that Tucker was still in good health and enjoying life. He climbed up a fence and sat on the top rail to watch horse and man move around the pasture.

"This is wonderful. Are you happy here? I hope so. I want my friends to be happy here too.” Khan said, enjoying the ride. "They are not as big as you are, and they do not know the land. But you can show them." Khan continued to talk to the horse, only providing a few gentle instructions as they rode around, before directing Tucker back to Jim, who was watching from the fence line.

Tucker came to an easy stop next to Jim, huffing a little, but obviously still full of pep. He nudged at
the sitting human with his head, and Jim gripped the fence to avoid falling off.

“Yes, Tucker, I know,” Jim said. “You’re having a good time.” He reached out and lightly stroked the horse’s forehead. “Did you have fun, Khan? Isn’t he great to ride? Such a smooth gait despite being such a big boy.” He held out a half of the apple he had, smiling as the horse lifted it off his hand and easily chewed it down.

"Yes, good horse." Khan said, stroking his shoulders before sliding off to dismount. He never felt so small, after getting off such a large horse. It made him smile though. "Good legs. Thank you, friend." He said, leaning into the large animal to show trust and a sign of their new friendship.

Tucker leaned into Khan in return, a show of trust, before reaching out his muzzle to Jim again, knowing there was more apple to be had.

“You can wait a moment,” Jim said with a light poke to Tucker’s nose. He looked down at Khan with a warm smile, knowing how much his friend valued his relationship with animals. “I’m glad you had fun with Tucker, Khan. Want to give him the last apple piece?”

"Yes, apple gift." Khan said, giving Tucker a slow rub and gentle scratch around his cheek and jaw, massaging his forehead before offering him the last bit of apple. "Good friend. Jim, horse brother."

Tucker munched on the last apple, long tail swishing back and forth, obviously enjoying himself. After all this excitement, his eyelids were drooping a little, however, showing he was ready for a nap.

“Looks like horse brother is ready for a nap,” Jim observed. “Shall we let him get some rest and go see some more animals? We might sneak an egg or two from the hen house or see if there are any piglets. The boys have got to be around here somewhere, too.” He looked around as if they might suddenly appear from nowhere.

"Good Tucker. Sleep." Khan said, stroking his hand down his neck and shoulder one last time. "Jim and Khan, go." He said with a smile for the dozing horse, then snuck through the fence to leave the sleeping giant to his mid-morning nap.

Jim patted the old boy one more time, too, before hopping off the fence. He linked an arm with Khan and asked, “Any request on which we see first, Khan? Chickens or piglets?” He led him in the direction of both, giving him time to consider. The early morning had faded into late, rapidly approaching noon, and the weather promised to be fine, with a light breeze and warm temperatures.

"Chickens." Khan said, enjoying his time with Jim and the sights of the farm. He would be sorry to leave Jim's home, but hoped to be welcomed back again, sometime.

“Chickens,” Jim agreed and wandered toward the henhouse, with a large area for the hens to peck in front. He laughed at the racket they made, a steady series of clucks and cheeps, as they scratched and fed on small bugs and corn pieces. “Aww, there are a few little ones, too. It really is the season.”

"Chickens. Very good." Khan said with a smile as he knelt down outside of their enclosure. "Beautiful color." He said, fond of the small birds. The family had a nice selection of black and white, yellow, and red chickens. "Hello, pretty."

“Did you eat eggs, Khan?” Jim asked, approaching the back of the neatly made hen house, built by Sam and Aurelan together. The back wall neatly lifted to expose the perches and allow for the easy retrieval of eggs. He picked up a couple to put carefully in their basket for later.
"Yes, eggs good. Chicken gift eggs." Khan said, referencing the story that Winona had translated into English. "Chicken good. Kind." He said, wishing he he could be inside with them, to hold in his arms and socialize with, to clean some of their feathers. But understood that they were enclosed so that they did not go far from the farm, or perhaps get hurt. It seemed at least in this case, humans were keeping their promise from thousands of years ago, keeping the chickens safe in exchange for their eggs.

“Do you want to meet some chickens?” Jim asked, seeing how closely Khan was pressed to the protective wires that kept out foxes, cats and other predators. “I’m sure they’d like to say hello to you.”

"Yes, please?” Khan asked as he looked to Jim with a smile. He stood, though did not know his way into the enclosure. "Chickens good. Friendly." He explained, feeling that perhaps people no longer knew this fact.

Jim carefully put the hen house back together and moved to the gate on the enclosure. He opened the gate to allow Khan inside, noting how the hens all seemed to look at them with cocked heads, as if unsure what to make of the two of them. “Friendly,” he said. “I’m afraid I don’t know all of their names, but the queen of the roost is Genevieve. She’s the big red matriarch there. Look at her strut. She knows she’s pretty.”

"Very pretty." Khan entered into the enclosure and knelt down again. A few of the chickens gave wary calls, but were still curious and moved slowly forward. Leaning down, Khan used his fingers to scratch at the ground, picking up a few kernels of feed, when he then offered in the palm of his hand. Seeing that Khan had done some of the work for them, several chickens came up and started to eat out of his hand.

Jim chuckled as the hens overcame their fear and sidled up to Khan to check him out. “Oh, they’re getting to know you.” He sat down and watched as more and more of the hens began to approach Khan, clucking at him. “They’re talking to you!”

"Pretty, lady. Pretty, lady." He said to each, and gently reached out to a buttered colored hen. Gently using his thumb and finger, Khan rubbed the back of her head until her eyes rolled back in bliss. He stroked his fingers down her back several times, dislodging a few loose feathers. "Good friends.”

“Oh, are you grooming her?” Jim asked, watching the feathers falling to the ground. “May I try?” He eased himself a little more into the pen and waited to see if any hens liked him. But they kept singling out Khan to cluck at and peck around. “I guess I’m the ugly duckling in this contest.”

Khan laughed softly, not wanting to startle his new friends. "Jim- scratch." He said, and dug around the ground again, finding chicken feed in the grass, picking it out to hold into the palm of his hand. The chickens once more took the offered food. But instead of getting around to grooming another hen, one of the red hens perched on his lap and promptly settled down. But because his lap was not a flat surface and she was a heavy set bird, she began to slip off slowly, until Khan wrapped an arm around her, holding the hen on his lap. "New friend." 

Jim snickered at the way the hen ended up held in place by Khan, enjoying the sheer respect his friend had for other creatures. So, he imitated the scratching motions Khan made, gathering up some food for the hens to eat, before holding it out in his palm in offering. After a moment, a small, almost black, hen approached and pecked at his hand. She paused and then began to eat the offering, even as Jim reached out slowly to stroke her feathers. “Two new friends.”

"Yes, good Jim.” Khan smiled at him, glad that he was no longer feeling left out. "Touch, gentle." Khan said, still carefully holding the one hen on his lap who had settled in quite comfortably now.
He stroked a hand down her back, petting the chicken as one would normally cuddle a housecat.

“So, you obviously had chickens,” Jim observed. “Did you have other birds? Pigeons?” he imitated a pigeon cooing, wondering if Khan would get the reference. His hen bobbed back a step and stared at him with questioning eyes.

"Many birds," Khan said, though did not know where to begin to start naming them for Jim. "One. Quail. Two. Pheasant. Three. Peafowl. Four. Heron. Five. Kestrel. Six. Kite." He said, mimicking several of their calls. Though the hens did not like the sounds of the kestrel and began to sound quite alarmed for a moment. But Khan fixed this by adding one more called to the group. "Seven. Chicken." Then called out as a rooster might, before clucking gently to the hens to soothe them.

Jim recognized a couple of the sounds, though he was more in the area of generalities (like thinking of the kite and kestrel both as hawks) for a few. But the quail he knew from the native varieties, and he imitated that call and said, “Quail. Quail. There are people who raise quails, but we never have. I am not sure about the others, though some people do keep hawks. Nobody I know ...” He imitated the heron and shook his head, not knowing what bird that meant.

"Quail. Quail." Khan smiled at Jim, though felt his bird calls would be better matched with pictures. But he could draw out the birds, their general size and wingspan later. "Many birds. Chickens, good friends." Khan said, giving the one on his lap some more attention before gently putting her back on the ground. She stood slowly at looked at Khan, wondering why she had been moved, as she had been quite comfortable. "Good ladies. Very pretty." He said and finally stood.

Jim loved that Khan referred to the hens as pretty ladies and smiled his happiness, stroking the side of his lone hen gently. “You’re more than a pretty lady. You’re a gorgeous lady. The prettiest hen of all.” He carefully helped a few more loose feathers to fall to the ground. “There you go. I guess I have to leave now.” He slowly stood up and brushed the dust off his pants.

As Jim and Khan headed back out of the gate and secured it behind them to keep the hens safe. More than a few looked at the humans with a few lingering clucks and calls. Though without an answer, the group slowly returned to eating feed and plucking out bugs from the grass. Khan stared happily at the birds for a moment and sighed, missing a part of his life long ago, the animals and people, and knowing how things are. But he was happy to have met Jim and learn all the new this about the world, so he did not think mournfully for too long.

Jim listened to the sigh and stepped into Khan’s side, catching his hand and squeezing gently. “Are you alright, Khan?” He did worry about how Khan was really faring in this new world, so far removed from everything he had known.

"Chickens, good." Khan said, taking Jim's arm. "Memory, Khan chickens, good." He said, not feeling like he could express himself when it came to missing those who were long since dead and dust. New things like chocolate and indoor plumbing and traveling the ocean were all big and amazing things. But he missed knowing his place, knowing the people in his village loved him, the animals and the land, and in some ways a simple life.

“Memory,” Jim repeated back. “Someday, Khan tell Jim about memory? Jim want to hear because Jim is Khan’s friend.” He didn’t want Khan to think Jim wanted to hear for the same reasons Winona did, though he’d be lying if the historian side of him didn’t perk up at the idea, too.

"Thank you, Jim." Khan said, resting his head on Jim's shoulder as if that were a common and acceptable thing to do. "Jim, good friend." He said, then after a moment suggested. "Jim and Khan go sit. Tree? Grass?" He said, wanting them to pause their tour, maybe eat a little something, and enjoy the fine weather for a bit.
“Of course,” Jim said and headed away from the barn and toward a small group of trees that bordered the buildings and paddocks. “We can have some of our lunch now, if you like. Or split the rest of the cornbread Aurelan gave us to share.” He chose a tree with flat ground and plenty of shade to settle under, urging Khan after him.

Khan sat down next to Jim, then laid back a bit, stretching out under the cover of the trees, enjoying some of the sunlight that still filtered down against his skin and face. His melancholy for the life he left behind would not last long, it simply needed to run its course. "This, good." He said, soaking in the sun and the natural sounds that carried across the farm.

Jim smiled over at Khan and decided for them, taking out the cornbread to share a piece between them, though he left some for later, too. “Here. Cornbread is good for anything that ails you,” he said, handing the half to Khan. “And so are trees and the sun.”

"Thank you, Jim." Khan said, accepting the cornbread and breaking off a bit to eat. It was still quite good and turning into one of his preferred foods in this new age. But it was company, not food, that Khan was after right now. A bit of peace with a good friend, to keep from feeling alone.

Jim scooted over to sit closer to Khan and ate his bread in contented silence for a few minutes. He dropped one hand to lightly brush over Khan’s nearby arm and allowed the spring day to just warm them both. “Do you think you can like it here, Khan?”

"Yes. Jim home, good. Khan like." But Khan turned his head to look at Jim, wishing to clarify a detail. "Jim and Khan go, Khan's temple. After. Jim and Khan, go here? Jim home?" He asked, wanting to know if they were coming back here, if Khan was coming back with him or being left behind.

“Jim stay with Khan,” Jim promised without thought. “Khan home or Jim home. Where Khan want. But ... Jim hope Khan want to come to Jim home.” He looked around them at the beautiful surroundings. “And when Khan ready, Jim want Khan to travel with Jim. See world. Learn history.” He reached out and squeezed the strong arm at this side gently. “Khan best friend. Jim not leave alone. Jim want go to Khan home to protect Khan stuff.”


“No need to thank me,” Jim said with a fond smile for his friend. “Friends take care of friends. Jim and Khan will look after each other.” He petted a little at the skin under his fingers “You’ll get more friends, Khan. You’re too nice not to have lots of friends.”

Khan purred softly at the touch, happy for the reassuring words and affection. Jim was much more forthcoming with touches when Khan was a lion, but he liked it just as much when he was a man, too. "Good." He said as he closed his eyes to soak in more of the sunlight.

“The petting is good or the words are good?” Jim asked, noting how Khan’s human purr was less powerful and deep than his lion purr, but no less delightful. “Or are both good?”

"Both, good. Khan happy." Khan said with a sigh. There would be very few opportunities for laying in the sun, resting in the grass under a tree once they headed back to the coast and across the ocean once more. So Khan was very interested in enjoying it while he could.

Jim moved his hand to stroke Khan’s hair which reminded him more of petting the big lion, something he looked forward to doing more of. Not that he didn’t enjoy this action, too, since it
made him feel even calmer and more in touch with his surroundings and the day. “Khan should always be happy,” he said. “Does Khan want to farm, like Sam and Aurelan?”

"Khan like, chickens, and goats, and horses, and cows, and cats, and dogs. Good." Khan said, showing more interest in the animals on the farm, then actually working farmland to grow crops.

“Oh, I see, what Khan wants is a zoo,” Jim said with a smile. “Sam’s dog, Joey, is probably out with him in the fields. That dog is completely loyal. silliest looking dog you ever did see, but faithful to his bones. As for cats, well, all the barns have them, but than tend to keep to themselves.”

"Jim want ... travel?" Khan asked, understanding enough that Jim was not interested in farming like his brother. Though was not entirely clear on what Jim wanted, for the rest of his life.

Jim considered this and nodded slowly. “I like being an archaeologist, and I’ll like it even more with the Marcus problem taken care of, but I like having a home to return to, as well. A place to do my research and write up my findings. And to go sit under the trees and be lazy for a few afternoons. Is that good with Khan?”

“Yes. Good. Happy. Happy, Jim. Happy, Khan." Khan said, turning to lean in, placing a hand on Jim's chest, half cuddling up to his friend.

Jim glanced at him and accepted the cuddling with a warm smile, moving closer to his friend. “Do you want any more bread, Khan?” he asked. “Cornbread makes us happier. Yum.”

"No more. Good food. Eat break." Khan said with a smile, but then added, "Jim eat. Good." He suggested, wanting his friend to eat and be comfortable, even though Khan was not being active at the moment.

Jim put the bread away for the moment, thinking it would be nice to have some for later. “Khan like bees?” he asked, thinking of gathering some comb to take home, as well. “There’s a couple of hives in the trees nearby ... at least there has been for a few years. If we’re careful, I can gather some honeycomb.”

"Yes?" Khan prompted. "Bees, good. Honey, good." Khan pulled his hand away and sat up slowly with a stretch of his arms and back. "Jim and Khan, look."  

“We don’t have to go yet, if you don’t want to,” Jim said. “I was just thinking about other things we could do when you were ready. I guess I never thought of how much there is to see around here, if you’ve never been here before. It’s amazing to get to see the farm with you, like a brand new first time for me.” He continued to lightly stroke Khan’s hair, tugging at the long locks.

"Yes, good farm." Khan said, then flopped back down on the ground to lay next to Jim once more with a smile. He was glad that Jim did not mean to rush them. Khan enjoyed a bit of quiet, and stillness, but had been prepared to go if Jim was getting anxious and kept suggesting things because he did not like to keep still. Which he understood, but Khan was enjoying it. "Happy, here."

Jim took a deep breath and eased himself down to lie beside Khan, pillowing his head on his arm.  “Alright, I guess I can take a bit of a nap, too. But don’t let me sleep too long, Khan. There’s still a lot to see and only a day to see it all in. We still haven’t found Sam or the boys ... they may be with him today.”

"Yes, Jim." Khan agreed. There were still the pigs and the bees, Jim's brother and his children, and other parts of the farm Jim hadn't mentioned enough for Khan to quite understand yet. Yes, there was more to see and do. But a bit of peace and calm with his friend was all Khan was after right now.
Chapter 14

Chicago was a much nicer city, compared to New York, in Khan's opinion. For one, it did not smell as bad. And two, the layout of the streets and the buildings seemed to make more sense. It did not feel as dirty as New York, but that could also have something to do with the early evening rain that washed away most of the filth. Khan and the Kirk family had spent a full day riding from the farm to Chicago, only to be greeted by a small rainstorm.

Winona had been eager to ask Khan what he thought of the large city hospital and many of the tall buildings, but to be honest, Khan did not understand why they were considered to be so interesting. Like New York, Khan did not understand what was so great about cities. Still, if he had to choose, he did like this one better. Built next to a very large lake, that looked like an ocean when standing near the shoreline, Khan understood at least why people might prefer this view, and therefore be willing to live stacked on top of one another in order to share resources in one space.

Living in a small space, stacked on top of another did not appeal to Khan, but it was apparently a practical means of conserving space. Khan did not understand it, but then again, he did not need to. He simply accepted it as one of many other strange facts of this age. Fortunately Winona had made arrangements with a friend of the family to stay the night, rather then take rooms in one of the local hotels. His name was Archer, and for the first few hours while taking dinner in his large home, Khan had thought they kept referring to his occupation as an archer, rather then the fact that it was his name. At least he understood by the time dinner was over and the party retired to Archer's study.

There, Winona and Chris handed over several of Jim's archaeological finds for safekeeping. Archer had been an explorer, like the Kirk family, and collected many items from around the world. His home held many of these items, but he apparently had plans to design and open a museum, so that the public might learn from the past by seeing his collection featured all in one building. This was an intriguing thought to Khan, as it meant being able to see remnants of cultures he never before experienced, next to each other, weaving a sort of story of human history over the years and across continents. Similarly, it meant that more then just the Kirk family would know about where Khan came from, his people, and their culture. It meant that they would not be forgotten, and that was important to him. So Khan sketched the layout of his tomb and where the artifacts Jim had collected had originally been resting, with the hope that when the other items were retrieved and protected, they could each be put back in their proper place, even if their new home was a museum half way around the world.

Jim loved visiting Jonathan Archer, whom he had grown up referring to as Uncle Archer (and still did, though he had to explain to Khan that they weren’t actually related. Which led to a more in-depth discussion of relations and friendship terms ... Jim loved learning with Khan). He did wish they had time to visit some of Uncle Archer’s other friends, particularly Hoshi Sato, who was a master linguist, but contented himself with knowing that Charles ‘Trip’ Tucker and Malcolm Reed would be joining them later. They were both Winona’s age, and he enjoyed watching Chris squirm a little when they flirted with her.

It was also exciting to get a map of Khan’s temple, prompted by their discussion of Uncle Archer’s ideas for a museum. Khan appeared to approve of the concept, and Jim hoped they could protect some of his artifacts there, as well as on site. They didn’t believe in completely stripping a place of everything. There was more that might be learned later, and some of the place’s meaning was thus preserved, as well.

They did not stay long in Chicago, but soon headed for the fastest form of transportation around, the train to New York. And boy, did Jim grin when he saw how Khan stared at the locomotive. “Khan,
help me with horses?” They were going to load them onto the livestock cars, so they could stable them with Bones while they went overseas. The horses were calm about the entire event, but Khan looked ready to vibrate himself into the air.

Khan was beginning to have a greater understanding for archaeology and some of the modern sciences, but nothing could prepare him for his first truly mind blowing experience the next morning. Not chocolate. Not guns. Not boats that could navigate the oceans. Not tall buildings towering over forests. Nothing was as completely shocking and stunning to the senses, as seeing his first train. The engine hissed and sighed and growled like an animal, but it wasn't alive. It was a machine.

Kneeling on the ground, Khan looked at the underside of the livestock compartment, seeing how the wheels sat on the tracks, determining if it was truly safe for his friends. Though being under the train car was not really where Khan should be sticking his head, so he responded as soon as his friend called for him. But did not grab the horses right away. Instead he walked up and down the loading plank several times and even inside the livestock car to ensure it was a safe space before finally leading Coffee up the ramp first.

Jim just smiled at how careful his friend was about the horse’s safety and waited for Khan’s seal of approval, before leading Sunrise up the ramp and into the car. “Trains are good for horses,” he said. “No walking. Lots of hay. They will be watched after. We can visit.” He made sure Sunrise was secure in her place before headed back down the ramp again. “Khan will like train, too.”

"Train very big.” Khan said, taking Sugar up next. "Horses, strong. Train strong, pull horses." Khan said, feeling that anything that could carry horses and people across land was indeed impressive.

“Just wait until we’re actually moving,” Jim said with a beaming smile and brought Sunset up to finish the quartet, securing him in his place with the others. He gave them all some affectionate pats and then said, “Shall we go to our car, Khan? We should have a private area where we can sit and look out the windows.”

"Jim says that it is safe. We will come to check on you later. I will come get you if there is any trouble." Khan said to the horses as he said his good-byes as well. But for now he walked with Jim up to the passenger cars, where they got on board. They walked past people arranging themselves in seats that faced backwards and forwards, sitting very close to one another, row after row. But this wasn't for them. Jim and Khan walked through two more cars like this before getting to the ones that had private compartments.

“We thought it would be easier on us all to travel with our own company only,” Jim said and opened the compartment door for Khan to enter. The train was a very new mode of transportation and still a bit rustic in design and form. However, their compartment had six seats, of which they needed only their four, with some padding and a large window by which the scenery could be viewed. Jim chose one of the seats facing forward and patted the seat next to him, closest to the window, for Khan to sit in. “Please, sit here, Khan,” he said. “Best view.”

"Yes." Khan agreed and sat down next to Jim, but then leaned forward to look out the window as other passengers continued to board the train. Khan had so many questions but did not know how to even begin to ask them. So for now he simply watched, absorbing everything he could.

After a few minutes Winona and Chris entered the private compartment, each carrying a bag they wanted to keep with them, rather then risk being separated from. "All settled?" Winona asked.

“Horses, bags and baggage,” Jim said with a grin for his mom. “I think Khan doesn’t really believe this train can move with all the different livestock, people and other items aboard.” He reached out to lightly stroke Khan’s hair, knowing the man enjoyed the touch. “We’re just a few minutes from
starting. You’ll get to see how fast a train can go. Hell, this is only my third trip on a train.”

“Language,” Chris said. “You’d think you were raised by a heathen …” He glanced at Winona with a smile.

The touch was enough of a distraction to pull Khan's attention from the people outside the window, to focus back on Jim again. He smiled at his friend and leaned back into his seat to enjoy the hair-petting. "Go? Jim and Khan, go? Train go?” He asked, eager and excited to experience this.

The whistle blew before Jim could answer, loud and wailing into the morning air, signalling the train’s readiness to move. Before the whistle faded into silence, the train lurched once, twice and then moved forward, wheels beginning to churn underneath them. A moment or two of slow chugging as the train picked up momentum and began to move along the track at a faster and faster speed. The scenery began to speed by, wind whistling by the window.

“Yes, we’re going,” Jim said, just to state the obvious, and leaned into him to look out at the passing view. He shared Khan’s excitement about the ride, loving how fast the train could move. It seemed a wonder to him, and he wished he could drive the locomotive, thinking the feel of such a powerful machine under his hands would be fun.

Khan jumped at the sound of the train whistle, and though he was startled by the sound, he was smiling, excited by the experience. The grinding of metal against metal was loud, but thrilling. "Ah!" He laughed at himself, one hand on the window, trying to get a feel for seeing movement outside, but sitting in one place. It was very different from riding a horse, because you moved with a horse, you saw what they saw, and you directed their movements. There was no control on a train, leaning left or leaning right would not make the train obey instruction. "Look!" Khan said, also pointing out the obvious of their movement, but was very excited about it and wanted to share the experience.

Jim laughed and hopped up to share the window more with Khan. “I know! Isn’t it amazing? I wish there were trains everywhere.” He watched the passing landscape with as much excitement as Khan, unaware of the two older passengers watching them with fond expressions. “Do you like the movement, Khan?”

"Yes, good!” Khan said, a little louder then necessary. Being inside the private compartment blocked out the sound of other people on the train, but amplified the sound of the wheels against the rails. "Train is loud! Train is fast!"

"Train will get faster,” Jim promised, as they continued to pick up speed. He put a hand on Khan’s back to steady himself as the train rocked with the motion along the tracks. “We’ll cut days off our trip. Help us get back to your temple faster and stop the Marcuses. Our friends will be at the ship.” He squeezed Khan’s shoulder, a little nervous about everything. “Protect Khan’s culture.”

"Jim, many friends." Khan said with a smile and then sat down, though kept looking at the window when a house or a horse or barn caught his eye when they passed it. "Khan remember ... paper, pencil, please." He asked Jim, wanting to write something down in relation to his culture.

Jim sat down with him and dug through his pack, smiling as he pulled out a new journal. “For Khan,” he said, holding it out to him. “Khan’s journal.” He thought it was more than time, especially since the other man had taken so quickly to drawing and writing.

"Good. Thank you." Khan said and began to write in his own language, the script was clean and neat, but it took Khan about ten minutes to write what he had intended. When he was done, he turned the book towards Winona and smiled. "Rabbit story. Khan words. Winona read, Khan words, change ... English." He said, unable to write in English, and feeling that since Winona knew how to
translate his language, that she would enjoy the story of the rabbit, since it was missing from her research. "Good?"

Winona accepted the notebook with hesitation, "You've written out the story for me?" She looked at the pages, eyes wide as if a feast had just been placed before her. It would take her time to translate, but they had a long train ride ahead of them, and there was nothing like a puzzle to make the time pass.

"You are the best friend ever," Jim assured Khan. "Khan done good. Look at my mom’s face. She’s about to burst into happy tears. This may be the best day of her life ... after her grand-babies anyway." He reached out and lightly kicked his mother. "Hey, ma, remember those manners you taught me. Say thank you to Khan."

"Yes, thank you Khan. This is a great gift. I might have some questions for you- but for now, this is wonderful." Winona said, pulling out her own notebook to begin working on the new project she had been handed.

Khan observed her for a moment, pleased that it had been well received. Sometimes Winona pushed him for information that he did not know how to give, but felt that this was a good way of giving her something that she wanted. So he settled back and placed a hand on Jim's knee. "How train go?" He asked, feeling that no amount of horses tethered together could maintain such a consistent speed.

Jim turned to Chris, hoping the older man had more idea than he did about the operation of a train.

"I’ve read about how steam locomotives run and pull cars full of people and freight," Chris said with a warm smile at both of the men sitting across from him. "I don’t quite understand all of it, but the power for the train is provided by burning fuels in a boiler that produces steam. The steam moves pistons, which are uh…” He picked out his own notebook and drew them for Khan and Jim, showing them generally how they connected to the wheels. “As long as they have enough wood and water, the locomotive can go forever.”

Khan did not understand the function of the pistons, even with the drawing Chris had made. But he did understand steam. It was a powerful force from underground, and can hurt. It seemed to him a sort of magic to be able to control steam like this, though also understood that such things were not magic, but science. Still, controlling the power of steam seemed as absurd and impossible as controlling a bat. But it was apparently possible. "Good. Steam powerful. Amazing."

“It is amazing,” Jim said, as slack-jawed as Khan at the idea of using steam to power things like the giant locomotive. He looked to Khan and said, “We should find out if they’ll let us look at the engine. Maybe we can even shovel some of the wood.” He looked no older than five as he suggested the idea, eyes wide and face young.

Khan laughed in delight at this suggestion, not knowing if such things were allowed or not. But the idea certainly appealed to him. "Train, loud!" Khan said, plugging his ears with his fingers as the train whistled in warning. The tracks cut through a road to a smaller town just outside of Chicago, there kids and families were waiting on foot for the train to pass, though waved and stared at the sight of the train that was still new to many.

Jim waved back at them as they passed, yelling his hellos out the window, where they were surely lost to the wind and the clatter of the rails beneath them. But he still yelled anyway, the noise joyous as it left his lungs. "Yes, the train is loud," he agreed, plopping back in his seat beside his friend. “Do you want to go look at the rest of the train?”

"Jim and Khan look? Can do this?” Khan asked, not realizing that they were allowed. "Yes, Jim and
Khan go?” He asked, looking to Jim, then to Chris, feeling that since he knew about how the train worked, that he also must know the rules.

Chris nodded and said, “Of course you can go and look around. They’ll be serving dinner in a couple of hours, so be back by then. Winona and I will keep ourselves entertained.” He glanced at Jim’s mom, who was still absorbed in the story Khan had given her.

“We won’t miss dinner ... dad,” Jim said with a little wrinkle of his nose, before he was bounding out of his seat and to the door of their compartment. “Ready, Khan?”

"Yes, ready." Khan said and stood to go with Jim. Though he gave a polite bow of his head to Chris and Winona upon leaving their company, even though Winona was not paying attention to it. "Khan, follow Jim."

Jim stepped out into the narrow corridor and waited for Khan before letting the door close behind him. “Let’s go back this time, I think,” he said. “If we’re lucky, the caboose will be open and we can stand on the back platform.” He began to head through the cars they’d walked in earlier, where there were more passengers, sharing rows of seats. His interested eyes took them all in, without staring, as he wondered where everyone was going and way.

Khan kept close to Jim, meeting a few eyes as he passed, but did not speak to the strangers. Some were reading, while others were wrestling with keeping children in their seats. It was a bit chaotic to his senses, and was therefore all the happier that they had a private room for the trip.

Jim looked at all of the passengers, but kept moving through the cars, slowing when they reached one of the baggage cars, loaded full of people’s trunks and boxes. “I wonder what all of these are full of,” he said. “Imagine if we buried these for a thousand years and later, somebody dug them up. You could learn a lot about us from our luggage.” He patted one of their boxes full of gear as they went by. “Our baggage would be cause for some speculation.”

Feeling that this was an interesting point, Khan touched the back of Jim's arm to ask him. "What does temple say about Khan?" He prompted, though had to speak louder then normal to ensure he would be heard over the rattle and grinding of the train.

“Well, I didn’t get to look at everything there, but it says Khan was important. Khan was respected. Khan was loved. Your people were skilled artists and farmers, based on the implements in the temple. You may have had a close tie to the Earth, per the drawings and symbols, and your creation tales support that idea. Developmentally, your people were quite advanced, given the design and crafting of your temple, coupled with the writings on your scrolls, which are both elegant and intelligent.” He shrugged a little and said, “I could babble on, but those are just preliminary observations from what I saw.”

"Yes-" Khan said and hooked his arm with Jim, quiet often feeling the need to be close to him, even though they were always together anyway. "Good people. Earth, important." It was interesting to hear what impression his people and his life gave to the modern eye. Some things lost, except for in Khan's memory, but many of the key aspects of their culture were still clear, surviving through time.

Jim leaned into Khan a little and said, “We’ll get back there and protect everything we can that was your people’s and yours, Khan. I promise. And if you want, we’ll help teach others about them, so they’ll be remembered and known by people. But only if you want.” He reached up and caressed through the long, black locks on his friend’s head. “I don’t understand everything you are and can do, but I’m so glad you’re still here and I got to meet you.”

"Mmhmm." Khan laughed softly in delight. He did not understand it all himself either, especially when
Winona said things about who he was, that he had not known about before. But he knew the basics. He knew his own abilities. And to honor his connection to nature. "Protect Khan people, protect memory. Good."

“And Khan is good, too,” Jim said. “Khan is best.” He moved on, keeping their arms hooked and led his friend into the next car, which was the first livestock car full of horses, all lined up in stalls. “Oh look, more friends.” He stopped in front of a particularly handsome thoroughbred, who tossed his head and snorted in excitement. “Isn’t he beautiful, Khan?”

Khan smiled instantly. "Hello." Horses in America were very different from the desert horses Khan was familiar with. For one, they were much taller. From the draft horse on the farm that was like sitting on top of a mountain, to these racers, horses here had much longer legs. "Are these your friends? Where are you going? Are you comfortable? You are very handsome."

The thoroughbred reached out his nose and sniffed at Khan, before snorting once at him. He lightly bumped his shoulder a couple of times, making low noises of pleasure.

“What is he saying?” Jim asked, noticing how the horse took to Khan instantly, like all equines. “He’s obviously taken with you.”

"Horse says, Khan interesting. Khan, friend." Though the horse was not one he had handled before, Khan was confident with animals and knew that this handsome fellow would enjoy having his chin scratched, and would not attempt to bite his fingers off for doing so. "Horses, tall here. America." Khan said, giving the horse a gentle scratch under his chin and along his jaw.

“Actually, he’s a thoroughbred from England,” Jim said. “Remember where Chris showed us where that is? Across the ocean in a different direction from where we’re going. But yes, he’s extremely tall, isn’t he? Built for speed. Horse racing is a big sport. This boy looks like he could be a good runner. Very athletic.”

"Thur ... hm." That was an interesting word. "Thur-o-bread." Khan continued to give the tall horse attention, petting down his neck and over his shoulder. "Good legs. Strong. You like to run? You like to race?" Khan continued to give the horse adoring attention, the kind he gave his other horse-friends, and the kind he enjoyed getting from Jim, too.

Jim understood a lot of what Khan said now, but a few of the words were unfamiliar to him still. But those sentences he got in full, which made him smile with pleasure, especially since the horse nickered back as if in answer to Khan’s words. And maybe to the scratches to his muzzle, too. He stopped and laughed as one equine let out a loud bray upon seeing him, turning out to be a donkey. “Khan, come look at this girl.”

"I will visit with you again. " Khan said in parting to the large race horse. He gave him some gentle touches around his neck and face before stepping away, responding to Jim's call. "Hello." Khan said to the donkey, " Are you keeping an eye on everyone? It feels strange to move, but not move your legs."

The donkey’s head tilted to the left, and she brayed loudly in response, three times. Her little tail whipped from side to side, even as she pawed at the ground.

“Oh, you have an admirer, Khan,” Jim teased as the little donkey brayed again and strained her neck in Khan’s direction. “She’s obviously taken with you.”

"Do you like your ears rubbed? I had a friend like you, and she enjoyed having her ears rubbed. "
Khan said, stepping a little closer to where she was enclosed. "You can relax a little. We will keep watch, keep everyone out of trouble. Hm?" Khan smiled at Jim, "Khan and Jim make new friends."

“What is rubbed?” Jim asked his friend, noticing how the donkey practically tried to climb out of the stall to get the hands that were petting her. He laughed as she pawed at the wood and balanced on her hind legs and hee-hawed right into Khan’s ears.

"Rub ear. Rubbed." Khan laughed as well, not minding at all, at the vocalization. Starting at the base of one ear, Khan began to stroke it slowly upwards, giving a few gentle scratches as he did. "Feel good." Khan said, and nuzzled his face in close to the donkey’s cheek, massaging her long fuzzy ears. "Happy girl."

“Rub,” Jim agreed. “Very happy girl. We best keep moving, before we end up adopting a donkey. Or she knocks down the stall to get out and follow you.” He lightly reached out to tug at one of the donkey’s ears and headed for the next door. “Our horses are in the next car."

Khan nodded in understanding. "You are a good girl, my friend." Khan said, still giving her every last second of attention as he could. "Look after the others. You yell if something is not right. I will come see you again." Khan gave her one last scratch along her cheek and jaw before pulling away. "Good friends." Khan said and followed after Jim again.

“I wish we knew her name,” Jim said and jumped between the cars easily, opening the next door. They were instantly greeted by four loud whinnies and straining heads in their directions. “Hello, everyone!” He trotted across the car toward their horses and gave each of them a big hug, petting their heads.

"Hello friends." Khan said with a soft purr to his voice, happy to see that their horses were well. "What do you think of the train? Better then the boat, I think. No side-to-side movement. Only forward." Khan smiled and began to give his friends the love and attention they deserved.

All of the horses nickered, whinnied or snorted their agreement to the statement, not minding at all the rocking of the train.

Jim went to their stash of food and pulled out some barley rolled with molasses, a special treat for the horses. “Want to share some snacks with our friends?” he asked. He held them out to Khan for him to take a couple. “Leave me some. You don’t get to have all of their love."

"Yes, good. Thank you, Jim." Khan said with a smile, thinking that the treats had been very thoughtful on Jim's part. "Jim has a treat for you. He is very good." Khan said, offering one of the treats to Sunset. Though while the horse nibbled and lipped at his hand, Khan leaned in to rest their heads together for a moment, showing that they were friends and that he was relaxed, so there was nothing to worry about.

Jim gave the first treat to Sugarcane, who delicately removed the treat without touching Jim’s skin. “You’re a good gelding.” he murmured and ruffled the long, white mane. “Such a nice boy.” He offered another bit of sweet barley to the horse, glad they weren’t hauling them over the sea again. But he knew he’d miss their animals, too, having grown rather fond of them. He always did have a soft spot for horses, but knew Khan had influenced him rather strongly in his feelings for the animals. He considered it a good thing.

"My friend." Khan used his fingers to brush Sunset's mane, speaking to him softly until the horse was lulled into a half sleep. With a soft purr, Khan nuzzled their faces together before moving on to give Sunrise similar attention. "There is another horse on the train. I know the boys annoy you sometimes, but he is very tall and very handsome." Khan confided as he fed Sunrise a treat.
Jim grinned at the mingling of English words, like ‘train’ into Khan’s native language, loving how adaptive his speech was. He glanced over to where his friend was speaking to the only mare in the bunch, before stepping to Coffee’s side to give the neglected gelding his treats and affection. “What is ‘annoy’?” he asked Khan, curious about the unfamiliar word.

"Annoy is ..." Khan smiled at Jim, knowing that he picked up some of Khan's language the more it was used, even if the context was while speaking with animals. He kept his hand on Sunrise, stroking her shoulder while he reached over and started to poke Jim in the shoulder, over and over. "Understand?"

Jim considered the actions and the word and the words that Khan had spoken all around them and said, “I think so, but I’m not sure. I know you don’t mean the boys poke her all the time.” He chuckled and shook his head a couple of times at the image of the geldings poking at Sunrise with their hooves. “It could mean harass or annoy or harangue or other words ... of course, a lot of those are pretty much the same thing.”

"Sunrise, annoy -" Khan thought about how else to explain, then used Coffee as an example. Knowing that he was mellow and would allow almost anything, Khan stroked his ears a few times, then gently pinned them back against his head to show the mood horses gave when they were annoyed, angry, or bothered. "Annoy."

Coffee just blinked a few times in what read to Jim like mellow confusion about what the strange human was doing with his ears. He huffed slightly, which caused Jim to laugh, eyes bright.

“Yes, I think the words harass or annoy will do,” Jim said, still grinning from ear-to-ear at the interactions between man and horse. He was rather fond of all of their horses, but Coffee’s esteem was skyrocketing at his patient tolerance of the human’s goofiness.

Khan laughed softly, letting Coffee’s ears spring back up into place. He gave the horse his thanks and affection, rubbing his nose the way he liked before going back to Sunrise, to ensure she got her fair share of attention.

Jim circulated among all the horses with pets and treats and talk, until he finally grabbed the back of Khan’s shirt and tugged lightly. “Come on, Khan, it’ll be dinnertime before we even get to the caboose. And I do want to stand on the back platform for a few minutes today.”

"Yes?" Khan chuckled, allowed himself to be pulled along. Jim had never handled him like this before and was not sure why he did not simply grab his arm or hand, as Khan had become accustomed to. Khan made his promises to the horses to visit again, before following the direction of his friend.

Jim did change his grip to catch Khan’s arm, as they moved into some rather dull cars full of graze for the livestock and goods for sale in New York. They reached the caboose at last, and Jim looked at the comfortable seats, all currently unoccupied. “This would be a good place to be alone,” he said and lightly bounced on one of the benches.

"Why, no one?" Khan asked, "Full ... in front, not full, here?" Some of the cars they had passed through had been very crowded in his opinion, and yet this one was completely empty. What was wrong or different about the end of the train that made it empty?

“This is a car people can visit if they want to, but nobody sits back here all the time,” Jim said. “It’s almost dinner, so most people are probably getting ready. We’ve got the car to ourselves.” He hopped back up and took Khan’s hand again. “Let’s see the view from the back.”
"Jim and Khan, together." Khan said, going to the left side of the car to look out the window, then over to the right, able to get a view of the land they were passing from both sides. "Feel ... strange, walk forward ... land, move-" Khan said pointing in the opposite direction. It was odd to walk in one direction, but everything pass by in the wrong way. It could be felt here, more than the other cars because of the windows on either side.

“There’s something even better,” Jim said and carefully opened the back door to step out on the platform. “Come, we can watch the scenery as it disappears behind us. Than it really will be moving in the wrong direction.” He waved for Khan to join him in the outdoors to lean against the rail and see the tracks behind the train.

As soon as Khan stepped outside onto the small platform at the end of the train, Khan beamed. He placed his hands on the rails, not wanting to fall off, but was otherwise bursting with excitement. "LOOK." He said loudly over the wind in their face and the sound of the wheels grinding on the rails. "FAST!"

“I know!” Jim enthused with him, nearly bouncing up and down again in excitement. “I don’t know how the steam power makes it work, but these trains can move. Faster than anything else men have built before.” He leaned out on the rail, lifting his face to the breezes. “Someday, these will carry people everywhere.”

Sticking his head over the side, Khan laughed with manic delight at the wind against his face. "LOOK, TRAIN!" Khan pointed out the engine at the front, which they were able to see because the train was headed down a curved section of track which allowed them to see the front end, and many of the attached cars right to the end, the one they were standing on. "GO FAST, TRAIN!"

Jim gripped the rail tighter as they went around the bend, being the last car making them the fastest part of the entire train. “You want to go faster?” he asked Khan, incredulous and delighted in one. He pointed to the right and said, “Look, Khan, that’s the Delaware River. Not as big as some we’ve seen, but nice, yes?”

"GOOD TRAIN!" Khan continued to shout, compensating for the nose of the train and wind in his face. "HELLO RIVER!" He said, basking in the fresh air and the natural sights they were traveling through.

Jim took a cue from Khan and threw back his head and yelled, “YEEHAW!!! GET ALONG LITTLE TRAIN!” And then he laughed like a loon, occasionally sounding a bit like the donkey in the livestock car.

Hearing Jim express his joy, Khan felt a sudden desire to wrap his arms around his friend and hug him. The embrace was tight, but warm. "Jim, friend." He said, though at least right now was not shouting in Jim's ear. "Best friend. Khan, happy."

Jim returned the hug without reservation and enjoyed the warm closeness of the other man. He always had enjoyed Khan’s company, but that only grew with time and better acquaintance. Khan was naturally affectionate and without artifice, something that helped Jim be closer to him, as he had grown leery after Carol of deeper relationships with new people. But Khan was easy. Sometimes, too easy. “I’m happy, too, Khan. Happier because you’re happy.”

"Train is fun! Amazing!" Khan said as he let go of Jim, looking at the tracks disappear behind them. He watched everything with wonder, taking in the sights at the fast-pace speed of the train, left to thoughts and questions and curiosity about the land they were passing through, but not really experiencing as directly as would be the case if they were riding the distance.
Most of the land was undeveloped, except for the small farms and towns, once they left Philadelphia, but there were definite signs of human activities everywhere, spread in part by the advent of the train. Still, most of the lands were still wild and wildlife of various kinds could be seen from the train, although they stayed a distance from the tracks. “What do you think of what you’ve seen of my country, Khan?”

"Big. Good land." Khan said, feeling that there was a great deal of variety, from what he had seen, from New York to the Kirk family farm in Iowa. He did like it, except for the cities, and wished he had the opportunity to explore the country further. And perhaps he still could, after the artifacts from his temple were recovered and the Marcus's were dealt with. But Khan did not ask these questions about the future, he simply addressed each day as it came.

“You’ve only seen a small part of it,” Jim said. “Would you like to see more, with me?” He turned and looked at Khan very seriously. “I know I shouldn’t ask yet. You’re still so new to the world, and there’s so much to figure out, but ... well, I guess I’ll just go where you want to, if you don’t mind.”

Khan stared at Jim for a moment, head tilted to the side and frowned at him with some amusement. "Khan goes, Jim goes. Khan follow Jim." It wasn’t the other way around. Or was that what Jim was suggesting? "Jim and Khan, go together." He said, a bit confused.

“Jim and Khan go together, wherever that may be,” Jim said and crossed his heart with one hand in solemn promise. “Stick together. Travel together. Be friends together.” He gave Khan another hug, this time pressing their foreheads together. “Good?”

"Good. Together." Khan said, leaning in like his lion-half, enjoying having their heads pressed together. In fact, Jim would find it difficult to be rid of Khan in the future, but fortunately that issue had yet to arise.

Jim chuckled at the way Khan leaned against him and instantly stroked through Khan’s hair with both hands like he was his friendly cat self. “You’re a good friend to Jim,” he said. “And Jim wants you to stay.” He rubbed just above his ears with both thumbs. “Shall we go back to eat dinner?”

Khan groaned softly, soaking in the attention quite happily. He sighed after a moment and nodded once. “Yes. Jim and Khan go back. Eat dinner.” He said, agreeing to the suggestion, willing to follow him across half the world, or simply to dinner.

Jim asked softly, “Would you, uh, would you like a full rubdown as a lion later?” He was rather fond of the animal from of Khan’s. “Or maybe you could show me the wolf? I mean ... if it’s not rude of me to ask and you don’t mind.” He felt a bit abashed at himself for even asking, but the temptation was too great for him to keep his mouth shut.

But Khan felt no shame or insult in this question. He smiled at his friend and nodded. "Yes, good." He enjoyed the freedom of taking his animal forms, and especially loved the attention Jim gave him when he did. It was somehow more acceptable for Jim to sit and stroke Khan's hair for hours on end when he was a lion, then as a man. "Khan, lion. Khan, wolf." He said with a smile, "Jim likes."

“We can sneak back here after dinner,” Jim said. “Mom and Chris won’t mind a little more time alone together. And we should have this car all to ourselves after dark. People are so dull.” He lightly took one of Khan’s hands and turned to lead him carefully back to their compartment. “Now, we’ll get to find out if the food is as good as advertised.”

"Yes, Jim.” Khan said, agreeing to the plan. But for now, it was dinner time. Khan was not sure how anyone was meant to cook on a train, but apparently it was a service that was provided. So he held
onto Jim's hand as they headed back, interested in finding out.

Jim felt like a teenager again, sneaking out of the house to perform some deed or another that Chris and Winona would frown upon, be that underage drinking, sex or setting Mr. Deitweiler’s pigs free. He still had the touch, though, moving silently out of the compartment that the group shared, carrying his pants and shirt over one arm, and gesturing for Khan to follow. He put a finger over his lips to show the need for quiet, even as he slipped into the hallway.

They made the corner without bumping into anyone, before Jim tugged on his clothes and shoes, winking at his friend. “We have to be quiet and not disturb anybody. Just follow me.”

Khan did not mind following Jim's direction, he trusted him completely. Though he did not understand why it had to be a secret. Jim was an adult, and surely he was not forbidden from doing what he wanted? After all, he had traveled most of the world on his own, so why would leaving the private compartment be any different. Still, he nodded to express that he understood, but did not speak, since he was expected to be quiet.

Jim led the way through all of the cars, where most people were sleeping. The sounds of snores, coughs, wheezes and a few gastronomic issues continued until they transferred to baggage and livestock. They did not linger this time, though the horses made sleepy whickers at them, but headed right through to the end.

“Sorry for asking you to be so quiet,” Jim said. “I just hate it when mom wakes up and demands to know what I’m doing. It’s like she forgets I’m not a kid anymore.” He floped on one of the comfortable benches in the caboose, glad for the deserted space. Around them, everything was almost perfectly black, with only the distant glow of a fire here and there to make habitation. The lanterns on the back of the caboose gave them their only light, but Jim thought Khan probably saw just fine.

Khan laughed softly at this. "Jim man. Jim no kid." He said, sitting next to Jim, but looking out the window at the dark landscape. At the moment they were passing through thick groves of trees, with the train tracks as a solid line cutting through them, and as such, the only sign of mankind.

“In a mom’s mind, you’re always a kid,” Jim said. “Even when you’re grown up. Even when you’re like Sam and all married and with your own kids. And especially with my mom. She’s never been one to let age get in the way of making you feel like a little kid.” He shook his head, but there was obvious fondness in his expression. “Besides, they would have both wanted to come watch. They’re as curious as I am.”

Khan crinkled his nose a little, thinking that was strange. He didn't want to be watched. He changed form because he liked it, and because Jim liked it too. He did it for Jim, not just anyone. "Jim see ... wolf?" He asked, getting off the seat to pull his shirt off.

“Please,” Jim said and leaned forward, eyes wide and curious. “I’ve never seen the wolf before. I have seen wild wolves. They’re gorgeous, if a bit scary. There are still packs of them in lots of places in the Americas, but fewer in Europe. I do want to see how you look as a wolf.”
"Wolf, big." Khan said, draping his shirt over the back of one of the seats before removing his pants. But he did not stay naked for long. Soon the arch of his back curled the opposite way, his hands turned into large paws, and his long black hair now took the form of thick black fur, covering his entire body. He was a wolf, but as Khan had warned, he was large, defiantly larger then wild wolves, nearly as large as when he took the form of a lion in fact. But one thing did remain the same, which were his blue eyes, which currently looked up at Jim for approval.

Jim did not ogle Khan when he undressed, but as soon as he knew the man was changing, he darted a look back at him. He could not help but stare in fascination as Khan’s form changed, morphed into a huge wolf. Well larger than any Jim had ever seen or even heard of. He gaped in unabashed awe for a long moment, before letting out a little noise of delight. “You’re gigantic!” He practically leaped out of his seat to rub at Khan’s head, scratching behind his ears. “Hello, big wolf! Big Khan!”

The wolf huffed softly in greeting. He turned his head to one side, then the other, rubbing his cheek against Jim's face. In his culture, the wolf was seen to be more of a warrior and protector, while the lion was seen as a powerful guiding force. Though both were extremely strong animals, Khan remained a pushover when it came to getting attention from his friend. He gave Jim a few licks, and lifted his head for more scratches.

Jim laughed a little at the licks and continued to scratch Khan behind his ears. “Yes, you’re a handsome wolf, too. May I see a paw?” He held out a hand, as if asking for a handshake. “Please?”

Sitting back, Khan offered up his front left paw, the pads of his feet and claws heavy in Jim's hand. He knew Jim was curious about him, and did not mind being checked over. For Khan, it was freeing, comfortable and easy to take on his animal form, and wished he could do it more often, but this was no longer his world, with people who knew him. He was a secret now.

Jim caught Khan’s paw and marveled at how it dwarfed his own hand, making it look fragile beside the long toes and claws. “Nice to meet you,” he teased and shook the paw a few times. “My name’s Jim. I’m going to call you Khan. What do you think?” He was totally playful as he said it, smiling at the huge wolf, completely unafraid of his friend. “This is so amazing. I wish I had a stick to play tug-or-war with you with. Of course, you’d probably toss me all over the place.”

Khan huffed at Jim again. He wasn’t a dog. Despite not having the vocabulary from before, and calling himself a big dog. He was a wolf. And wolves did not play games with sticks. Though the truth was, he probably would if that was what Jim wanted to do. For now, Khan took his paw back and gave a stretch, arching his back, then hunching his shoulders. A soft whine-howl slipped from his throat as he relaxed into his body.

Jim wondered what that huff was about- agreement? Disagreement? Something else entirely? He shuffled to the side of Khan and rubbed his hands through the thick fur of his back and flanks. “You are such a good wolf,” he said. “I wonder if you’re one of the basis's of werewolf stories … Huh.” He tugged at Khan’s tail playfully.

Werewolf? What was that? Khan watched as Jim pet and brush his friend with his fingertips. Though when Jim pulled at his tail, Khan flopped it in the opposite direction. What are you doing, don’t pull on that. So he turned in place and faced Jim again, but this time dropped down to roll on his back, showing his underside.

Jim instantly pounced on the exposed belly to give Khan a thorough rubdown. He always enjoyed the flailing paws and sheer happiness of a canine getting a full belly rub. The implicit trust did not escape him, either, and he felt honored to have Khan’s. “Such a good doggie,” he teased. “Good
Khan.” He boldly flopped on the large wolf.

"Rarr rra-" Khan vocalized happily, throwing his head back and forth, pretending that he was being attacked and in distress. But clearly enjoying the fun of it. He wiggled and groaned under Jim, teeth bared in a wolfish smile as Jim gave him pets and scratches.

“What kind of noise is that?” Jim demanded. “Silly puppy! You make silly noises for a wolf.” He hugged the large canine form and the sat up again to rub at the large chest and scratch under Khan’s chin. “You’re nothing but a big, silly puppy!”

"Rrrraw rrhumph-" Khan thumped his tail against the floor, enjoying the attention and being called a puppy. It made him feel young, and not like a man who had been alone for several thousands years.

Jim made a little noise in a similar vein, as if trying to speak ‘wolf’ language to his friend, even as he laughed a little in delight. Eventually, he wore himself out with all the scratching and petting and rubbing and laughing, collapsing to the floor with his head resting on Khan’s stomach. “You’re a good wolf,” he said with a grin, facing toward Khan’s big head.

Khan did not mind Jim using his stomach as a pillow, but he couldn't get to him this way. So he turned to his side, where he could then nuzzle and lick Jim's face. Deeply happy that they could be close like this, the wolf gave a deep sigh and settled.

Jim laughed at the friendly licks, which were a bit more comfortable than the ones given by Khan’s lion form. He settled a hand on Khan's side and lightly stroked through the fur, humming softly under his breath. “I guess it would be alright to take a nap here, right? Say, next time, want me to bring some rawhide chew bones?”

Khan licked at Jim's forehead and the hair on the top of his head, matting it down. Though at the suggestion of bones to chew on, Khan blew air through his nose and mouth that sounded like a scoff. *No bones.*

“What!? I bet you’d like them,” Jim said. “They look tasty and all of the canines I have ever known loved them. Or we could share some jerky.” He grinned at the wolf, knowing he probably looked silly with his hair all wet and matted.

Khan groaned and laid back down. He wasn't like other canines, obviously. Resting his head against the floorboards for a little bit, Khan then began to vocalize again, this time either trying to mimic or be louder then the train whistle blowing. "Rarrow rrrooo-

Jim laughed some more and said, “Just because you’re a special wolf doesn’t make you too good for the simple pleasures.” He covered his ears at the howling. “Whoa. Are you trying to raise the dead?”

Khan wagged his tail against the floor again, thumping hard, even though he remained laying perfectly still otherwise. "Rrr ... OooOoo-"

Jim threw back his own head and howled as loudly as he could, feeling the breath rattle in his lungs and throat. He nearly toppled over backward as he leaned into the cry and ended up wheezing laughter and happiness. “Oh, that hurt.”

As soon as Jim started to howl, Khan perked his ears forward. It was all gibberish, but amusing nevertheless. So he licked Jim's face in reward, rubbing their faces together in a show of affection and support.

Jim grasped Khan and gave him a big hug, laughing at the licking and wolf nuzzling. “So, did I do it
right than? Give a good howl at the moon? Or whatever it was we were howling at.” He rubbed at the pricked ears and smiled in a content way at their easy companionship.

Reaching out gently with his paws, Khan tapped Jim on his chest and shoulder. It was a playful gesture, to push and wrestle with Jim, even though Khan was still laying on his side.

“Oh, wanna get tough, huh?” Jim asked and lightly pounced on the wolf for wrestling. He mock-growled at the big canine, encouraging him to roll around and play. “Big, tough, puppy.” He tugged at his ears and fur.

"Arr rrrah-" Khan growled in play, squirming around on the floor, pulling his head away each time Jim grabbed his ear. "Rrru." He flipped himself up onto all fours and scampered down the length of the train car, then darted back again, charging into Jim instead of jumping over him.

“Oof!” Jim said and allowed himself to be bowled over onto his back. He wrapped himself around the wolf and tried to drag him to the floor. “Such a bad wolf! Bad Khan!” His voice teased the large canine without any kind of fear or anger.

But Khan just bounded off to the opposite side of the train car and made another quick turn to run another lap back. This time however instead of colliding with Jim, Khan jumped over the car seats in a sort of game of hide-and-seek.

Jim laughed at the way Khan just escaped from his hold and bounced off again, ears and tail high with joy. He stood and chased after Khan, scrambling over the benches to try and catch him. “Come back here! Bad puppy!”

Panting with excitement, Khan crawled under one of the seats, then jumped up on the next. This game of chase was fun! So he ran down the length again, before bolting back. This time when he approached Jim, he stopped and gave a full play bow, ears forward and watchful for Jim's next move.

Jim recognized the move and gave Khan a deep, human bow in response. He than got into a playful mode, bouncing around on his two legs and making little feinting gestures toward the wolf. “You want to get tough, do you?” he asked. “Want to wrestle with me, pup?”

"Rrrr!" Khan scrambled to the left, then to the right, landing heavily on his front two legs to show how strong he was. He fake-snapped his jaws at Jim, but never actually bared his teeth, nor made any attempt to pierce the skin on his friend. Instead he simply ploughed a shoulder into Jim's knee to push him over.

Jim dodged right and left, before letting out a yelp when Khan banged into his leg. His ass bashed into the floor as he toppled over under the weight. “Hey! No fair! You big bully. Bad puppy.” He lightly grabbed at the wolf’s ears and squeezed them playfully.

"Rrhooh-!" Khan howled and promptly collapsed on top of Jim to pin him to the floor. He whined dramatically and huffed, paws on Jim's shoulders, nuzzling his face and neck.

Jim let out his air in a rush from his lungs as Khan made him a pillow, but promptly wrapped his arms around him to hug. “Alright, what’s with all the whining?” he asked in a gentle tone, caressing the strong face of his canine companion.

Khan gave a yawn of his large jaw, then tilted his head back for more scratches under his chin. As a lion, his hair was short, except for the thick black mane around his head and chest, but as a wolf, his entire body was covered with thick black fur, nearly impenetrable and collecting mass amounts of
“You are a handsome beast,” Jim said, scratching under Khan’s chin as he tilted his head. “Look at this fur.” He tugged at it playfully. “Just as black as your human hair. So gorgeous.” He scooted around a little to get comfortable and held on to his wolf. “Does Khan like wolf or lion better?”

Though Khan could not speak human languages in either his lion or wolf form, he gave a very defining shrug of his shoulders as he settled on the floor. He lightly wagged his tail as the compliments and the cuddles, wishing to always be treated like this.

“Oh, so it’s even,” Jim said. “They are very different animals, but yeah, they’re both pretty amazing creatures.” He considered for himself and said, “Jim like Khan in all forms. Best friend.” He watched the way the tail wagged and said, “Yes, you’re a good boy, Khan. I’m glad you like being petted so much.”

Pleased to hear this, Khan gave a Jim a small lick on his cheek and chin. He knew that they were friends. And knew that Jim liked him as a lion, so he was pleased to know that Jim also liked him as a wolf too. No matter what he was, Jim liked him. That was good.

“Want to go outside for a few moments again and look at the moon?” Jim asked, tilting his head back to look at the door. “There should be a full one to howl at to your heart’s content and stars to enjoy, too.”

Yes! Going out! Khan jumped up to his feet and rushed to the back door. There he waited with eagerness, shifting his weight from one front foot to another. Let’s go, Jim!

“Just don’t jump off the train, okay.” Jim said. “Unless you can keep up, alright?” He climbed slowly to his feet and made his way to the platform door, opening it to let them both out. He stepped outside and stood on the back of the caboose, before raising his eyes to the sky. “Wow.”

With no intention of jumping off, even if he could keep up, Khan rushed outside onto the platform. Jumping up so that his front paws could rest on the railing, Khan took a deep breath in, taking in all the scents in the night air. It was marvelous! "Ah-roo! RahooOoo!” He called out into the night.

Jim leaned against the rail, as well, and threw back his own head. “Awoooooo00000000!” he howled into the night. “Arroowooooo!” The last one ended in a series of giggles, as he lost control of his howl. “I am a terrible wolf.”

Enjoying that Jim was playing along, Khan licked at his cheek to show his support. Then he continued to look out into the night from the back of the train. It felt nice. Though he did appreciate hot baths and stable living arrangements too. Khan hoped for many more nights under the moon and stars with Jim.
Chapter 15

The train trip ended sooner than Jim wanted, given how much both Khan and Jim enjoyed the experience. But they unloaded their gear and horses in New York, leaving their mounts to Bones’ care (and how the doctor grumbled at the whole group for visiting him for only a couple of days before heading on) for the duration of their trip back across the ocean. Winona and Chris finalized the last details with Sulu and the rest of their expedition, while Jim and Khan purchased the remaining items necessary for their journey.

After sending all of their cargo ahead, Jim led Khan in a leisurely fashion along the wharves to the dock currently housing their transport, the Enterprise. He wanted to talk to Khan about one important thing before they boarded and met their friends and traveling companions. “How are you feeling, Khan?” he asked, as they slowly approached the three-masted schooner that would carry them across the Atlantic Ocean.

It would be strange to go back to his homeland, since Khan felt he had only just arrived here, to be with Jim in his own country not long ago. He stared at the ship, glad that his friends, the horses, would not be forced to make the trip again. But he would miss them. "Sad, good-bye to horses. Friends."

Jim stepped in and wrapped an arm around his shoulders, giving him a brief squeeze. “We’ll see them again, Khan. And you’ll make new friends. I wanted to talk to you about them.” He paused and turned to face Khan, looking into his ice-colored eyes. “I want to tell them the truth about you, Khan. I want you to show them wolf and lion. That Khan is special. Important. That protecting Khan’s temple is right. But I want to make sure that’s good with you.”

Khan listened and blinked once as Jim spoke to him on this important subject. "Jim, say ... Khan, lion, wolf, secret ..." He said, reminding him that before he had promised to keep it a secret, to keep them safe and so that others would not be scared, because no one else was like him. "Jim, say now ... no secret?"

“I don’t think it’s safe to tell most people, but these are all our friends,” Jim said, “including Sulu’s crew. We’ve worked with some of them since I was a baby. Heck, mom’s known Trip and Malcolm since before I was born. These are people we can trust ... they won’t betray you, Khan, and knowing why this is so important, why we’re finally going after the Marcuses ... they deserve the explanation.” He lightly caressed Khan’s hair, knowing how much he enjoyed the touch. “Only if you feel safe, though. We won’t tell them everything, if you don’t want to.”

Khan smiled a little as Jim began to pet his hair. It was a comfort, and he welcomed it, no matter the reason. "Tell new friends, truth. Khan, different. Khan, lion. Khan, wolf. Khan safe." He said with a small tilt of his head, leaning into the touch of Jim's fingers. "Tell, truth. Good."

Jim smiled and said, “Thank you, Khan. Thank you for trusting me and my friends. That means a lot to me.” He lightly stroked Khan’s hair for another moment, before turning to continue their stroll to the ship. “So, there’ll be a lot of people aboard. The main ones to know will be the Captain, Hikaru Sulu, with his first officer, Pavel Chekov, and two of my close friends, Spock and his wife, Nyota Uhura. Mr. Montgomery Scott is the engineer of the ship.” He grinned at his friend a little and said, “I know, that’s a lot, right?”

"Jim, many friends. Number people in small village." He said, trying to express that the number of friends Jim had could make up a small village. "Speak names, again when Khan say hello." He asked, wanting to hear the names again once he sees the people face to face.
"Yes, I will," Jim said and paused a moment, looking awkward. "Khan, do you have a second name? Like I do? Jim Kirk. Winona Kirk. Christopher Pike. Khan …" He tried to make the pause after Khan obvious to try and indicate that a second name might go there.

"Understand." Khan said with a smile. "Khan, Lion of the Desert. Khan speak, Nahkmet. Nahk … Khan, Khan, Nahk ... Nahkmet. Understand?" Khan said, also trying to provide space between the names. "Khan Singh. Singh, Wolf. Khan speak, Singrir. Singrir ... Singh. Understand? Khan. Noonien. Singh." He paused again, hoping Jim understood the two titles that were apart of his name, one in the beginning, one at the end. He was Khan, the lion, named for Nahkmet. And Singh, the wolf, for Singrir. And Noonien, his true name, between lion and wolf, Noonien, existing between the two other parts of himself. "Noonien." He said, lightly tapping his own chest with his fingertips. "Khan. Noonien. Singh." He said, knowing this might be difficult. "Lion, speak. Noonien. Wolf, speak. Understand?"

Jim stared at him for a long moment, completely unsure which of the multiple names were his friend’s, if any. Khan Nahkmet Singh Noonien. That was more than a mouthful and somehow didn’t seem quite right. And what was that with the Singrir? Finally he shrugged and shook his head a little. "Just tell me your name?" he asked hopefully.

"Khan. Noonien. Singh." Khan said with a sigh. He would have to write and draw it out in his notebook later for Jim, once they were settled on the ship and Khan had access to his bags. Maybe Winona would understand, since she seemed to know some of the stories of his culture, she might be able to explain his full title, since he was having trouble.

"Hey!" Jim protested. "Don’t sigh at me. That was a lot of words to explain your name." He looked almost pouty for a moment, before brightening again at knowing Khan’s complete name. "Khan Noonien Singh. Should I introduce you that way to everyone?"

"Jim, friend. No angry." Khan said, placing his hand on Jim's chest, not wanting him to be upset. "Please." He said with a small frown, petting his hand over Jim's shoulder.

Jim chuckled and said, "I'm not angry, Khan. I'm just sorry that I couldn't understand what you were trying to explain to me properly. It's about how you got your name, right? I think I understand the Khan and the Singh ... but not so much the Noonien." He shook his head and looked a bit abashed. "I like your name. Khan Noonien Singh. It's a good name. Jim likes."

"Khan. Noonien. Singh. Name. My name." Khan said, having only recently learned how to incorporated "my" and "we" and "me" and "I" into some sentences. But he was still working on it, as this was only the fifth time he had accomplished the correct use, to indicate himself.

"And Khan is good if Jim introduces him to everyone as Khan Noonien Singh?" Jim asked, not wanting to break any taboos with given names. He knew that in some cultures, you did not share all of your names with everyone.

"Yes, good. Tell friends, Khan Noonien Singh." Khan agreed, feeling that his full name was appropriate, as they were also his titles and how his people had always known him. Therefore, this was how Jim's friends would know him.

"And Jim should call you? What is best name for Jim to call his best friend?" Jim asked, curious to see if there was a preferred name that he should call the man he had always referred to as Khan.

“Noonien,” Jim said and smiled warmly, eyes bright with pleasure. “Jim’s best friend, Noonien.” He caught the hand on his chest and squeezed gently. “In public, I’ll call you Khan, but in private, I’d be honored to call you Noonien. Khan call me ... James?” Ordinarily, he was not fond of his full name, but for Khan to call him in private ... he thought he might enjoy that greatly.


“Yes, we’ll go,” Jim said with a light bump into his friend. “They should all be there by now. And I don’t want to keep Sulu waiting. He can be frightening.” He offered Khan an arm to escort him the rest of the way. “He’s a good man, though. One of the best to have on your side in a fight.”

Though Khan had felt overwhelmed by Jim naming all his friends before, he was still looking forward to meeting new people. "Good." Khan said, linking his arm with Jim, comfortable and familiar with this gesture as they walked together. "Good friends. Strong."

Jim remained silent, though contentedly so, through the rest of their walk to the ship, but as they reached the dock, he slowed and gestured. “The Enterprise.”

She was a lovely ship, even with her sails all tucked away for docking, masts reaching to the sky. Her body was double thick with timber to protect against cannon attack, but her lines were lean and long to knife through the water. And every inch of metal on her gleamed in the sunlight.

“Isn’t she a beauty, Noonien?” he asked his friend. “She’ll carry us safely across for sure.”

"Yes, Enterprise. Strong. Good." Khan said, able to recognize that this ship was built differently than the cargo vessel they had been on before. Though Khan still did not know enough about boats or traversing the ocean to talk at length about the subject. Still, he could see that the ship was well built and streamlined for efficiency.

Jim led him up the gangplank and to the deck of the ship, pausing at the top and waving at the people scattered all over the ship. “Hello, all!”

Hikaru Sulu looked up from his place on the deck, where he’d been conferring with Chris and said, “We were just about to take off without you,” in a commanding tone.

“Of course you were, Hikaru,” Jim said with a grin. “Are we all assembled?”

“You’re the last,” Chris confirmed to them. “Come on down, Jim, and introduce Khan to everyone.” Around him, the rest of their expedition was arranging themselves in a semi-circle to greet Jim and meet Khan.

“Ready to meet all our friends, Khan?” Jim asked his friend, knowing it must seem like a lot of new faces to the other man.

There was quite a gathering present, but Khan felt it was promising that Jim had this many friends ready and willing to come to his side when called. And not only that, there was fair diversity among the faces before him, a mix of men and women, as well as representations of several cultures. “Yes. Hello.”

“Here we go than,” Jim said and led Khan up to the first man. “Hikaru Sulu, Captain of the Enterprise and a fine buccaneer. Hikaru, this is Khan Noonien Singh.”

Sulu just gave Jim a tolerant look and offered a hand to Khan. “A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Singh. Or do I call you Khan?”
Oh, right. Handshakes. Khan offered his hand and gave a polite nod to the Captain of the Enterprise. "Hello, Captain." He said, shaking hands. "Call name, Khan." He said, feeling this was still appropriate for all present acquaintances.

Standing right next to Sulu was another, much younger man who also immediately offered his hand, who in Khan's opinion, reminded him of a very over-eager puppy. "Hello. I Pavel Chekov. Navigator of the Enterprise. Welcome!"

"Pavel!" Jim said in delight and gave the man a big hug. "Khan, this is Pavel Chekov. He’s about twelve years old, but he’s good at making sure we don’t get lost on the ocean."

"Jim! It good to see you!" Pavel said, his English almost as messy as Khan's.

"Hello," Khan said, shaking his hand gently, feeling that this young man was indeed a child, and perhaps the small and skinniest of the entire crew. He did however give one final glance to Sulu, hoping he did not perceive it a rude to be ushered along so quickly, after all, he was the Captain.

But Sulu just watched his navigator with a fond expression, not minding at all. He nodded to Khan as the other man glanced at him, smile pulling at his mouth.

"And next in line is the beautiful and dangerous Nyota Uhura," Jim said, gesturing to the gorgeous woman standing beside Pavel and watching the proceedings with a slightly amused expression. "She speaks over twenty languages fluently ... even more than me."

Uhura tossed her long ponytail over one shoulder and looked at Jim with a faint, and feigned, scorn. "Kirk, be so kind as to introduce your friend properly."

"Khan Noonien Singh," Jim said with a gesture to his friend and a warm smile at Uhura, completely unfooled by her demeanor.

"Hello." Khan said with a smile for the woman. "Good, speak many languages." Khan said, feeling that this was quite impressive, knowing only two languages from his region, which have long since been lost, and now English. "Very good."

"Charmed, Mr. Singh," Uhura said and offered her hand in a more graceful fashion than any of the men. "I look forward to learning your language, as well. I understand that it’s quite rare ... I do wish to make sure it is preserved." Her voice lilted in the quiet afternoon air, carrying clearly to everyone.

"Thank you." Khan said accepting her hand, and enjoyed the gentle touch of a light handshake. "Much time on ship, speak Khan language." He said, looking forward to learning from Jim's friends, as well as becoming friends with them in his own time.

"If you would like, I can help with your English, as well," Uhura said. "I teach at a school for freedmen and women." She lifted her chin, proud of her work and heritage.

"Uhura is amazing," Jim confirmed. "She’ll have you speaking as if you never had to learn English as an adult by the time we reach India again."

Teaching and school were words Khan understood, so he appreciated the fact that Uhura was suggesting she help with his English. But there was one word he was confused about. "What is freedmen?" He asked, having no concept of this.

Uhura frowned and looked at Jim with disapproval. "You haven’t explained to Mr. Singh about slavery?"
Jim raised in his hands in a plea for mercy. “We haven’t traveled through any slave states, and Khan is new to this country. I promise, we’ll explain more about Khan and it’ll help you understand. You know where we stand, Uhura,” he said with utmost sincerity. “You know.” He referred obliquely to their support of the Underground Railroad through Iowa, helping escaped slaves make their way to Canada and freedom.

Her face still registered a hint of displeasure, but Uhura nodded her understanding and said to Khan, “I’ll help explain it to you as part of learning English ... and about the history of our country.”

Khan watched Jim and Uhura with wide eyes and concern. Had he asked something bad? There was a sense of tension suddenly, that had not been there before. He wanted to apologize, but still did not know exactly what was being discussed. "Thank you. Happy to learn. Want to learn." He looked between the two and asked, "No, angry?"

“Well, Uhura has every right to be angry,” Jim said, “but I’m not angry at her ... or you, Khan.” He placed a hand on his back and rubbed a comforting little circle.

Uhura nodded a few times, face smoothing out into a softer expression. “I’m not angry at you, either, Khan ... or at Jim.”

“Thank you, Uhura,” Jim said and urged Khan another step forward. “This is Uhura’s husband, Spock. Spock, this is Khan Noonien Singh.”

Relieved that Jim and Uhura were not upset with each other, nor with him, Khan felt he could move on. “Hello, Spock.” Khan said with a small nod. Though as Spock did not offer his hand to shake, Khan did not offer his either, and he was quietly grateful for not having to touch hands yet again.

"Mr. Singh. It is good to meet you. Jim-“ Spock said, looking to his friend after the introduction. "You are looking well." He observed politely.

Jim grinned at Spock and said, “Thanks, Spock. I’m glad you and Uhura could join us for this. I know you hate leaving behind your scientific studies.” He turned to Khan and said, “Spock is a scientist and a brilliant one, I might add. He’s also very logical and reserved. I think you’ll get along very well. He’s sort of the anti-Jim Kirk.”

"We understand that you require expertise in many fields of study on this endeavour. Perhaps, now that we are all assembled, you might clearly articulate our roles, and the goals of this expedition." Spock suggested.

“Don’t worry, Spock, I will, but let me finish introducing Khan around and let Sulu get us on our way,” Jim said, grinning even wider at the other man’s impatience. “We’re going to be aboard for several weeks, so we’ll have lots of time. And we will need it.” He urged Khan a step forward. “This is Charles ‘Trip’ Tucker,” he said, introducing a man just a few years younger than Winona and Chris. “Trip, this is Khan Noonien Singh.”

“A right pleasure, Sir,” Trip said with a clear Southern accent and held out his hand. “I’m mighty pleased to be a part of another Kirk expedition.”

Khan tilted his head to the side, trying hard to ensure he was understanding Tucker correctly. A right pleasure? A correct pleasure? Correctly happy? "Hello." Khan said and shook his hand, "Good pleasure."

Trip chuckled and said, “Much obliged, Sir,” as he shook his hand warmly.

“Trip’s a former engineer, but he keeps his hand in, especially when Mr. Scott is around,” Jim said.
He looked for the Enterprise’s chief, not surprised to find that he was not on deck.

“Scotty’s below,” Sulu said. “We may not see him until after we’re underway.”

“Typical,” Jim said and introduced the last man on the deck that Khan had yet to meet. “And finally, this is Malcolm Reed. He used to be a soldier, but he’s been retired for a long time. Still, he’s got an excellent grasp of military strategy. Malcolm, this is Khan Noonien Singh.”

“A pleasure, old man,” Malcolm said, holding out his hand for a shake. “When Mrs. Kirk called this old soldier back to arms, I considered it nothing less than my duty to respond.” His own British accent was clear in his speech, despite the years of being away from his home country. “I know my duty when it’s staring me in the face.”

"Hello," Khan said and shook his hand as well. "Good, pleasure. Old man." Khan said, mimicking the greeting with a little smile. He understood military and understood soldier, but did not understand the term 'duty'. But it seemed to be important, or at least having something to do with Winona.

Malcolm smiled at the way Khan greeted him and tossed him a little salute. “You and I will get along just fine, old man.”

“And now that you’ve met everyone, are we ready to be underway, Captain Sulu?” Jim asked, turning toward the Captain.

“Aye,” Sulu said. “Please clear the decks and make way for sail!” He raised his voice so it reverberated across the decks.

“Aye-aye, Sir,” Jim said with a salute to Sulu and took Khan’s arm. “We’ll reconvene in two hours to discuss our expedition and so I can tell you more about Khan. Until then, everyone get yourselves settled and stay out of the crew’s way. You know the drill!”

There was a chorus of agreement, and people dispersed with their belongings in all directions, heading mostly for their quarters or in the case of Sulu and Chekov, to get the ship away from the port. Jim steered Khan, both of them still carrying their things, toward the quarters they would share. “Let’s hope we miss the exciting weather this time.”

"Jim, many friends." Khan said with a smile, looking over his shoulder as every scattered to go about their business. But he remained close to Jim and did not stray while they went to their quarters to get everything put away for the journey. "Good-bye, land!"

“We’ll be back,” Jim said, taking a last look himself at the docks. “I wish Bones were here,” he murmured, before heaving a little breath and leading Khan into their small cabin. “Here we go. One bed this time, I’m afraid. We gave the best cabins to our friends ... for going with us.” He set down their stuff and began to unpack it into the watertight compartments built into the ship. “The Enterprise is the best ship afloat. She’ll get us there safely ... and back again.”

"Good ship. Strong." Khan said completely confident. And having shared his nights in Jim's bed on the farm, Khan was quite accustomed to having only one bed between them. He was comfortable with the arrangement, and was pleased that Jim seemed to remain equally so. Putting away his things, Khan pulled out his notebook, wanting to write down some notes to himself on the people he had met, as well as what he and Jim had discussed earlier regarding his name and how he might best be able to explain it again.

Jim nodded at Khan when he pulled out his notebook and continued his own efforts to put away all of their clothes. The rest of the expedition’s gear was safely stored below, but Jim had his own
satchel of archaeological tools with him. They were special to him, having belonged to his father in part and having been gifted to him over the years, as well. “I have something for you, Noonien,” he said, pulling out another leather satchel, this one with tools for Khan.

"Gift for Khan?" Khan asked, lifting his head and setting down his pencil in his notebook to save his place. He smiled at Jim and stood to receive the offering with respect.

“Well, I hope you like it,” Jim said and held out the leather satchel with special reverence to Khan. “This will allow you to join the rest of us in our work, if you like. I can teach you how to use everything inside.” He smiled hopefully at the older man, wanting Khan to share and delight in the work.

Khan smiled at Jim as he accepted the satchel. But before even opening it to look inside, he leaned in and gave Jim a kiss on each cheek. "Please, show." He said as he then stood back to look through the leather pockets, unfolding it so that all the tools were visible. "What is-?"

Jim felt his face heat a little under the unexpected kisses and cleared his throat a little awkwardly. “Uh, yeah, so we have a trowel, which is the most important tool, allowing you to dig up artifacts gently. And this is a brush, to carefully wipe off dust and dirt that accumulated over an artifact without damage. Here is a measuring device to take measurements of the artifacts you locate. And these are fine picks, for when you are dealing with something very small or delicate. Look how sharp the point is. And a small core sampler, if you need to take some soil. There’s also a compass and some drawing utensils. And finally, a cloth for your hands and the artifacts. This is a personal kit to carry everywhere.”

"Good." Khan said, holding each one in turn, getting a sense of the weight of it and how it was to be used. "Khan do, what Jim do?" Though he would still need to be shown in what circumstance each item was to be used, Khan was interested in learning. "This good."

“If you want,” Jim said. “I’d like to teach you about what I do and see if you enjoy it. You might decide it’s not for you. But ... well, I wanted you to have these. I hope you like them, even if you decide not to be an archaeologist.” He offered Khan a warm smile. “When we reconvene in a few hours, I’ll tell everyone the truth about you. I’d like you to show them what you can do ... I mean becoming a wolf or lion. They’ll believe our story then. Is that alright?"

"Thank you, Jim, for gift. Honoured gift. Good." Khan said with a smile for his friend. With care, he wrapped the tools back up so that they did not get left behind or damaged. "Khan, no gift for Jim. Good friends." He said, hoping that was enough for now, since he did not have a gift to give back.

"Yes. Khan show friends. Jim explain."

“You don’t need to have a gift for me, Khan,” Jim said. “Gifts are for free.” He hoped Khan understood that he enjoyed giving him things without a need for a return. “And Khan best friend. In all forms. May I pet lion?”

"Yes, good." Khan made sure everything was put away before he looked back to Jim with a smile. "Pet lion now?" He asked, wanting to be certain he understood Jim’s request.

“If you don’t mind that I ask you,” Jim said, still pretty shy about the topic. It seemed a very personal thing to ask of his friend, but he did love the freedom the animal forms gave both of them.

"Yes, good." Khan said and sat back on the edge of the bed to take off his shoes first. "Khan happy. Jim happy. Enjoy lion. Enjoy wolf.” He said as he continued to undress. For the time being Khan felt he needed Jim’s permission to transform, so he was always pleased when Jim suggested it. But he did
hope, that after the truth was shared with Jim's friends about who Khan was, then he could at least change form on the ship, whenever he wanted without causing fear or concern.

As Khan removed his clothes, he then leaned forward to get on his hands and knees. But before his hands touched the ground, they had turned into large paws, as he changed into a lion.

Jim lowered his eyes to give Khan some modesty to change, before peeking when he thought he heard a lion’s little rumble. “Hi there,” he said and knelt, throwing his arms around Khan’s neck for a hug. “Thank you for trusting me enough to recross the ocean and go back. For being the one to give me a chance to save as much of your heritage as possible.” He let out a long sigh. “For letting me finally face Carol and her father.”

Khan purred and rubbed his large face against Jim. He wondered sometimes why Jim would speak to him as a lion or wolf, but not as a man, but truthfully did not mind. He was the same person, regardless of what form he took.

Jim breathed out another long sigh and stroked the thick mane with tender hands, smiling at the softness of the fur and the strength in the feline form. “I know,” he said and pressed his face into mane. “I find it easier to talk to you this way, to tell you that I’m scared to see than again. Her again. I’ve only ever caught a few glimpses of her since that last time ... when I found out who she really was. I’ve faced down her father, Alexander Marcus, but never her. I think I need to, Noonien, if I’m ever going to be whole again.”

Taking a single step forward, Khan leaned into Jim. It was a subtle show of strength without actually pushing Jim over. He purred again, tilting his head one way, then another as Jim found all his favorite spots. He gave a low huff, gathering air into his lungs before calling out in a single roar.

A giggle escaped Jim at the noise, and he pulled back to rub his nose against Khan’s gently. “Don’t roar too loud yet, Noonien. Nobody knows what you can do except for Winona, Chris and myself. The others will be scared if I suddenly have a wild lion in my cabin unexpected.” He lightly tugged at the ears peeking through the fur and then hugged his friend again, letting out a low breath. “Will you help me with the Marcuses, too?”

Khan chuffed in firm agreement instead of roaring again. Then he rubbed his face against Jim, licking his face and his arms, anything he could really. He liked having his ears tugged as a lion more than as a wolf, which was something he would have to try to explain to Jim at some point, but for now he simply enjoyed it.

Jim wished he could say the laughter provoked by the rough, but friendly, tongue was manly, but instead, he knew he sounded like a little boy, giggling in delight. And he eased himself to a sitting position, finding that more comfortable than trying to crouch. “Thank you, Noonien,” he said around the giggles, knowing his friend offered him complete support. “With you and my other friends with me, I can do this. I can finally be rid of her influence in my life ... and together, we can stop them both.” He pressed his forehead to Khan’s, before scratching behind his ears again, testing how his lion liked that.

Khan looked at Jim, then lightly closed his eyes, purring in agreement. He then rested his large head in Jim's lap, settling on the floor in front of him. Though his long tail thwacked against the wood in the small cabin as it twitched back and forth.

Jim lowered his head to rest it atop the strong head of the lion’s, eyes closing peacefully at the feel of his friend’s fur under his cheek. He stroked the strong head and under the mane across his shoulders. “So, here’s what I was thinking for the introduction. I’ll tell everyone about your temple and how amazing it is and than describe how I found you, alive, inside. And how you were in there for a very
long time ... and when they don’t believe me, I’ll ask you to show them one of your forms, whichever you want. And I’ll do my best to describe how you’re involved with your Gods ... or maybe I’ll let mom do that. I think she understands your mythos better. Once they see and understand how important you are, they’ll know why we’ve chosen now to go after the Marcuses. And after, well, maybe you can change back and answer any questions they may have as best you can?”

Khan lifted his head slightly to listen and look at Jim as he spoke. He blinked a few times, with a warm rumble in his chest as he breathed in and out. As Jim explained the plan, Khan then tossed his head up and chuffed once in agreement, before nuzzling against Jim again. It sounded like a reasonable plan, though was worried he would not be able to answer questions very well, as sometimes Jim still did not understand him, so he imagined that these new people might understand him even less.

“Good! What do you say to a brief nap before then? The bed should be strong enough for a man and a lion. Shall we give it a try? Mom or Chris will get us if we don’t wake up in time to talk to everyone,” Jim said.

Khan agreed with a nuzzle of his head into Jim's chest. He then got to his feet, only able to take two steps before he jumped onto the bed. He walked around it in a small circle, getting a feel for it before laying down. Even though the cabin was small, and Khan was a large lion, there was still just enough room on the bed for Jim to curl up next to him.

Jim hauled himself up much less gracefully and made his way over to the bed, tossing off his shirt and toeing off his boots, before stretching out along Khan's back. He yawned once and settled himself into the pillows and bedding. “I'm tuckered out from the long trip back and forth,” he said. “I think I'll try to rest as much as possible this voyage. Take a clue from a feline.”

Khan purred happily in agreement, rolling his head to the side so that his cheek was against Jim's shoulder. His tail spasmed with a life of its own, twitching from side to side as he rested with his friend, lightly closing his eyes to rest.

Jim watched the tail through half-closed eyes for a moment, feeling a terribly mischievous impulse build inside him. And as the tail flicked suddenly in his direction, he pounced!

The lion was startled out of his cat-nap and lifted his head. Jim! Khan gruffed. His tail twitched again, but this time on purpose, smacking Jim in the face.

Jim laughed and rolled on his back, grabbing at the tail that thwacked his face. He caught the appendage and lightly stroked at the long hairs on the tip, grinning at his friend. “Khan,” he responded. “You’re such a good lion.” And then he did his own version of a purr and rubbed his entire body along Khan’s.

The lion almost appeared to smirk knowingly at the compliment, yes he was a good lion, very good. Khan lowered his head again calmly, purring happily to have Jim nudge and roll into him. As an invitation for these sorts of cuddles and to show he was relaxed, Khan lifted one front leg up in the air, though his wrist joint was bent, causing his paw to flop over.

Jim sat on the bed and lightly held the paw, examining the large toes. “May I see your claws, Noonien?” he asked, curious and feeling safe enough to ask. Besides, his friend looked relaxed and silly, one leg stuck up in the air, with his paw waving about.

Khan stretched his paw in Jim's hand, the large toebeans rough against Jim's hand, but the fur in-between was soft and silky. As his claws came out, Khan kept still for Jim to examine them. If he
playfully pushed or swatted at Jim like this, he would hurt him, and Khan did not want that.

“Wow,” Jim said, staring at the massive claws. “You are armed and ready.” He lightly traced a finger over one curve. “I’m glad you’re on my side.” And with that, he dropped his hands to Khan’s belly and gave him an enthusiastic rub.

The claws disappeared and Khan’s paw once more went limp and relaxed once Jim was done looking them over. His head shifted on the bed again, this time with his right shoulder, so that he could rest his head on the bed completely upside-down. He purred deeply, soaking in the attention and affection.

Jim dropped his head and rubbed that over the upper part of Khan’s chest and stomach. “You are so soft and warm,” he murmured, raising his hands to scratch at the exposed chin. “Does a big kitty like to have his chin scratched like a barn kitty?”

Yes! Khan’s entire chest was vibrating with each purr. Chin scratches were the best. Ever. His eyes lightly rolled back into his head, and with that, the giant lion was completely subdued.

“I’m keeping you,” Jim declared and fully flopped on Khan, head tucked under his chin. But he kept scratching at the exposed chin, loving the powerful rumble that caused tremors through them both. “I don’t suppose lions give rides …” He snickered a little at the image.

It was easily a possibility. Khan was more than strong enough. And willing. But not right now, not when he was getting cuddles and scratches. So instead he gave a small huff, to indicate that he heard Jim and was agreeable to it. Later.

Jim loved the contented rumble and reached up to tug lightly at the ears hidden in mane. But than he tucked himself into Khan completely and asked, “Is this a good way to nap? I’m very comfortable right now.”

Good. Khan purred softly, settling once more. His front leg that was still half up in the air began to slowly drop until it was resting on top of Jim, as if the human were a plush toy to be cuddled by the lion. Closing his eyes once more, Khan sighed deeply, slipping back into his cat-nap.

Jim shut his eyes and quickly drifted off himself, feeling as safe as he ever had in his life, tucked close to the chest of a huge lion.

Jim surveyed the crowded deck from his position on the foredeck, aware of Khan beside him and the many eyes gazing up at them from below. He felt his spine straighten and chin raise in response, even as he smiled a thanks to all his friends assembled. “So, I imagine you’re wondering why after all this time, we’ve finally decided to go up against the Marcuses. We’ve let them operate with impunity for too long not to make you curious as to what’s changed. The answer is simple, Khan is the temple the Marcuses are almost certainly ransacking now is Khan’s … and I mean he is the person the temple was built for.” He paused as there was a confused stirring among the assembly, though he caught the approving gaze of his mother and Chris. “When I went into the
temple to rescue what I could from the hands of the Marcuses, I made the greatest discovery of my life in the center ... one I’ve only shared with my mother and Christopher Pike up until now. Not only important, but unbelievable without the proof I’m about to give you.”

Khan stood slightly behind Jim as he spoke. His eyes would wander over the gathering of friends, then to the ocean horizon for a moment, before turning back to the people. Placing his hand on Jim's back to show his support, Khan knew he could not explain the situation as well as Jim could, but at least could provide very clear evidence when called upon.

“I found Khan himself,” Jim said. “He was entombed in the temple not long after it was built ... and he was still alive.” Now, there was a sharp murmur in the crowd, disbelief and uncertainty throughout.

“He’s telling the truth,” Chris said firmly, his voice a balm to the rest.

“That’s rather hard to believe, mate,” Malcolm said, looking at Khan with an appraising gaze. “Your friend doesn’t look much older than you, Jim.”

“I know,” Jim said, “but he’s over a thousand years old, and he was entombed in that temple for most of those years. He’s the last of his people, a treasure trove of their culture, including language.” He gave Uhura a knowing glance, thinking of how exciting she would find that idea. “And we can prove it ... if you'll trust us.”

"Jim is friend." Khan said, speaking up, taking the time to meet everyone's gaze, reading every doubt and suspicious they held. "Jim save Khan. Khan different. Khan ... The Lion of the Desert. The Wolf Warrior." He said and began to remove the robe he was wearing. He was comfortable with his own body, in all its forms. But was thoughtful for how the others might react. So he decided to transform into the black wolf, feeling that was a close enough likeness to a dog, that Jim's friends might not be completely scared off.

As the man on the deck above them suddenly began to disrobe, there was a bit more disgruntled muttering, but then, his limbs suddenly began to warp, the skin melt away to be replaced by a black pelt, and the noises became ones of shock, fear and wonder, all intermingled. Jim felt compelled to stand a step in front of his friend, hands raised. “Please, don’t be afraid. Khan is capable of changing his form to both a wolf and a lion, as well as existing as a man. We have kept this secret for a lot of obvious reasons, but we trust you all not to spread word beyond the company we’ve kept here.”

“You have my word for my crew,” Sulu said sternly, eyes still locked on the wolf behind his friend. “Thank you, Sulu,” Jim said with clear relief and reached back for Khan, wanting to show his trust for all forms of his friend. “If the Marcuses had found Khan, there is no telling what they might have done to him.” Heads nodded throughout the crowd in agreement with that sentiment. “And once I really grasped who Khan is and how important he is, I knew we couldn’t let Carol and her father desecrate his temple and his culture.”

As the wolf, Khan stood firmly at Jim's side. His large ears were perked forward, listening and watchful of every reaction from those below.

"Zat is verrry big volf!" Chekov said, breaking some of the stunned silence with an obvious observation.

Jim laughed softly and lightly stroked Khan’s head, looking over the faces of his friends. “My mother believes that Khan is a demi-God, a child of the two Gods of the creation myths of his people
... and I’m inclined to believe her. But that doesn’t make him indestructible or not in need of help. We’ve called you here to ask for you to help us save his temple, recover all of the artifacts stolen from it and put a permanent end to the Marcus family all at once.”

“The child of two Gods?” Uhura asked, swinging her head to look at Winona.

Taking this cue, Winona stepped up, closer to the front of the gathering to speak to everyone as well. Though gave Jim and the wolf-form of Khan space, as she had not asked permission or made arrangements to get close to Khan as a wolf. "There are key creation stories from his culture. One is from Nahkmet, a lioness, and goddess of the sun. Where I believe Khan gets the first part of his title. The second is from Singrir, a wolf, and god of the moon. Where I believe Khan gets the second part of his title." Winona said clearly over the break of waves against the boat and wind in the sails. "In his own time and culture, he might have been seen as a holy man or prophet, as he has made many references to speaking to the Gods. That and his ability to transform into a lion or wolf at will, I think we can all agree, there is something amazing to be said for this find."

After Winona mentioned Nahkmet and being a lion several times, Khan decided that Jim's friends should see that too. So the wolf gave a big stretch, and a moment later, had grown out his skull and his feet to take the form of a lion.

A collective gasp escaped almost everyone present, and the group moved back a step at the sight of the huge lion now by Jim’s side. But the way Jim stood his ground and even grinned fondly at the great beast eased some of the worries.

Trip Tucker took another step closer to the foredeck, looking over the lion intensely, and then turned to Winona. “You had my support against the two Marcuses without the impressive display,” he said, “but I agree that we must keep Mr. Singh out of their hands and get back whatever they’ve taken. This is a remarkable find, but I’ll be damned if I see how you’re going to tell the world about it, darlin’.”

"Telling the world is not the priority. Nor on the agenda at this time." Winona said glancing to the lion, and then to her son who was showing great loyalty to his new friend. "The truth about Khan might end with what we see with our own eyes, and hear with our own ears. We have not discussed if he wishes to be known to the world, or not. At this time, we have only discussed the importance of reclaiming his temple and the artifacts that the Marcuses have taken."

Uhura said, “His contributions to language alone may be invaluable. And beyond that …” She looked to her husband and than back toward Khan. “... he proves that so many things we believed impossible to be possible. If I had not seen him transform with my own eyes and know you so well …”

“I’d think you were joshing us,” Trip finished for Uhura, definitely in agreement with her assessment. “Y’all know that there are still folks who’d want your friend burned as a warlock.” He could think of a few of his neighbors in the rural South who would think so.

Jim firmed up his chin and said, “There are a lot of people who might want to exploit Khan for his knowledge and abilities or hurt him because of them. We believe that he and everything pertaining to him are too important to be lost to people like Alexander and Carol Marcus. However, you all know how dangerous this mission may be, so we wanted you to understand why we’re asking you to risk your lives for a person you don’t know and a place you’ve never seen."

Spock nodded in agreement with Uhura. In the natural world, a baby grows up to be an adult. A kitten into a cat. A calf into a cow. But a salmon didn't grow up to be a whale, and certainly didn’t transform at will to one. The closest transformation Spock could immediately think of was a
caterpillar turning into a butterfly, but even that had its own evolutionary rules. This was very different. Khan could change between a man, a wolf, and a lion. Did that mean his bones and internal organs change and reshape each time? Did that mean, he was technically three species in one? Or was he one unique species? Spock had many scientific questions regarding Khan, and because of the importance and anthropological significance of even answering one of these questions, he silently vowed to protect the man and the remaining artifacts of his culture.

“Are we all in agreement then?” Chris asked, stepping into the middle of the group and looking into various faces to read the feelings there.

“What’s the plan?” Malcolm asked as his answer.

Jim grinned at the answer, seeing the same resolution in all of the faces looking back at him. “Thank you,” he said and paused a moment to regather his thoughts. “We’re going to need to scout out the situation first. I don’t expect the Marcus expedition to be ready for any of the trouble we’re going to bring them, but we’ll have to scout for the size of their party and how they’re currently set-up. Malcolm, you, I and Khan will be responsible for that. We’ll be several days ahead of the rest of the party. Once we scout, we’ll formulate a plan of attack, but the main idea is to separate their party from the temple first, to prevent any damage to the building and whatever remains inside.”

Khan purred softly and leaned a shoulder into Jim's leg as his friend spoke. It was good to see how quickly Jim's friends came around on the issue. Jim clearly commanded a great deal of loyalty from them.

"Vill he be able to tell us, what he vants preserved at site and what ve kan pack?” Chekov asked, wanting a sense of what would need special care and handling to pack aboard the ship and what would need to be put back in its original place.

“We can help with that,” Chris said, noting how the man he viewed as his son fearlessly (and seemingly unconsciously) stroked the head of the big lion by his side. “But of course, we’ll defer to Khan about what items may have more significance or be or more cultural value, as well. It’s uncommon to have that kind of firsthand knowledge to draw on. Something else that makes Khan unique and important.”

“We hope you’ll use this trip to get to know Khan and a bit about his people,” Jim said. “He’s still pretty new to this age of ours, so you’ll be helping him to get acclimated, as well.” He lightly tugged on a fuzzy ear, smiling down at his companion. “We’ll be reviewing all of our equipment once we’re ashore, but while we’re aboard, I’ll show everyone the map of the area around the temple and where we suspect the Marcus party is camped.”

The lion squinted his eyes in delight, purring happily as Jim rubbed and gently pulled on his ear. He was happy that Jim's friends now knew about his abilities, as it meant he could transform any time he wanted, without needing to explain why there was suddenly a lion aboard a ship out at sea.

Though he was still listening to what Jim and the group were saying, Spock quietly spoke to his wife. "As a linguist I know you are interested in teaching Khan English, and learning his language in exchange, but if you do not feel safe, one of us can sit in on the lessons with you." Uhura was a brave and strong woman, but even so, this man was a lion. And a wolf.

Uhura glanced at Spock and wrinkled her nose a little. She turned her head to look at Jim and the lion, clearly hearing the low, contented rumble from the feline and seeing the almost sappy expression on her friend’s face. She stepped forward and asked, “Does Khan mind if other people want to pet his animal forms?”
Jim grinned at Uhura and asked Khan, “May Uhura or the others pet you?”

Khan lifted his head and nuzzled his face against Jim’s arm, he gave his sleeve a careful bite, and pulled his head to the side, indicating he wanted Jim to keep close, to follow. As Khan then stepped down the stairs slowly and sat down in front of Uhura, turning his head to the side in offering.

Jim frowned a little at the tug, before nodding understanding and stepping down the stairs with Khan. “This is a lion version of yes,” he said with a nod to Uhura.

She held out her hand for Khan to sniff, as she would for a large dog, unsure of the right etiquette, before lightly stroking his mane. She found the hair a bit stiff, like her own, but when she brushed over an ear, the fur was soft and silky. Smiling, she scratched just behind the appendage. “Oh, your fur is soft,” she said. “I never imagined a lion as having such soft fur.”

Khan purred instantly, as a lion he loved his ears stroked and rubbed. Not so much as a wolf. He sighed and leaned into the touch, but was not as bold with Uhura as he was with Jim, since he understood that the people here were still more then a little shocked, and possibly afraid, despite their curiosity. So he was careful not to do anything that might be perceived as aggressive or showing too much of his strength.

Curious too, Spock stepped forward, just behind his wife. He watched how she stroked the lion and his response, before attempting to touch his mane as well.

“Oh, his fur is soft,” Jim said with a fond smile for both his friends. “And he retains all of his intelligence, too. He understands everything that is said to him as a lion, just like he does as a man.” He stepped back to allow Spock a little more room, even though he kept stroking the length of Khan’s spine, not leaving the lion’s side.

“See, he’s a big, friendly kitty,” Jim said with a fond smile for both his friends. “And he retains all of his intelligence, too. He understands everything that is said to him as a lion, just like he does as a man.” He stepped back to allow Spock a little more room, even though he kept stroking the length of Khan’s spine, not leaving the lion’s side.

“Well, I’ll be a son-of-a-” Trip cut himself off and walked around the lion and the people who stood petting him. “I’m still having trouble believing my own eyes.”

“Come pet him yourself,” Uhura invited, moving away with some regret, since she’d been enjoying the encounter. “That will help you believe it’s real.”

When Uhura was done petting the lion, Spock stepped away with her, giving others a chance as well. Was it strange to pet the lion, knowing he was a man? Was it strange for Khan to be touched like this? After all, people wouldn’t go up to him as a man and start petting him and examining him.

"Zat is one big kat! What do you feed him?"

Jim chuckled and said, “Well, Khan has only eaten with me in his human form, so we’ve just had normal human stuff. But he likes trying all kinds of new things.” He reached out to give Pavel a hug, liking the teenager very much. “You should give Khan a pet. He likes that a lot.”

Trip, meanwhile, had moseyed over to Khan and offered his hand in the same way Uhura had. “You’re a big cat, I’ll give you that, Mr. Singh,” he said. “Reckon nobody back home’d believe this tall tale.”

As a lion, Khan did not go in for sniffing hands and the like. So he simply turned his head so that Tucker’s head was now on top of his head. He hummed softly, pleased by the attention, though also glad to have Jim remain at his side, stroking a hand along his back.

Trip chuckled and said, “Doggone if this ain’t the damnest thing I’ve ever done. Trust the Kirk family to get me in more trouble. Winona, your son is definitely a chip off the old block. He could be more like you and his father if he tried.” He stroked Khan’s mane with a careful hand, before
attempting the same attention to the ears that got Uhura such favor.

Khan purred softly as Tucker rubbed his ears. The happy rumble in his chest was clear, and was the sort of thing that could be felt vibrating through the wood planks under his feet.

Winona smiled proudly, but sadly at her friend Trip. Though leaned into Chris to give him a one-armed hug. Jim never knew his father, not first hand. And yes, Jim had a lot of George in him, but he had a lot of Chris in him too.

Chris looped an arm around Winona and said, “We couldn’t be prouder of Jim, Trip. We’re behind this expedition completely. Khan is our friend, too, even though we’ve known him an even shorter time than Jim.”

“We saw Captain Archer on the way to New York,” Jim said, knowing how close Archer and Trip were.

The older man’s face softened a little at the thought of his best friend. “Yeah. We’ll be bringing him back some good tales. A shame he couldn’t get out here, too. I’d like him by our side for this.”

"We left in his care, a few artifacts that Jim and Khan managed to bring back with them. After we deal with Marcus, we’ll be bringing him stories and goods right to his front door." Winona assured with a little smile.

Trip snorted and said, “Jon and Alexander used to be good friends. I knew him, too. I’m not surprised the way he turned out, but Jon’s still hurt by the loss of his friend. He’ll be glad when we’ve finally stopped him for good.” He nodded to Jim and said, “And so will I. Whatever y’all need of me, it’s yours.”

Sulu approached now, face as impassive as ever. He surveyed the lion from head to tail and nodded once. “He’s a fine omen for this voyage,” he declared firmly. “The Enterprise is honored to carry such an important passenger on such a mission. When we dock, I’ll leave her in the charge of Mr. Hendorff and accompany you on your expedition.” A smile curled his lips into something almost feral. “I could use a good fight.”

Khan looked at Sulu when he spoke, then to Jim, looking pleased. I like him. Truly, Khan liked all of Jim's friends, who were to be his new friends. But Khan understood something in Captain Sulu that he was drawn to, familiar with. Khan gave a little stretch of his front legs, then his back, then turned to go back up the stairs to where his robe lay waiting. There, Khan turned back into a man and put his robe back on.

Jim did not accompany Khan back up to the foredeck, but let him dress in peace, as he exchanged handshakes and thank yous with everyone. They agreed to reconvene after breakfast the next morning to go over the maps for the first time and begin a discussion of the best approach to stopping the Marcuses. For now, it was nearly dinner and everyone still had some settling in to do. Within a few moments, only Sulu, Chekov, the crew, Jim and Khan were left on the deck. Sulu headed back to his business with a nod to Jim, and Jim called up, “May I join you, Khan?”

“Yes. Good.” Khan said with a smile, hand on one of the wood railings as the ship cut through the water. “Jim, good friends.” He said, feeling that had gone well. Pleased that Jim's friends could be trusted.

“And Khan is the best of them,” Jim said, also pleased with how well everything had went. He walked up the stairs to join his friend and put a hand on his right shoulder, squeezing gently. “They’ll help make the voyage pass faster, too. Uhura will help you with your English, and you can
teach her your language. And at night, if we’re lucky, we can get her to sing for us. Trip, too. He’s got a fine voice, if you can persuade him to sing. He prefers to tell stories. He’s pretty funny.”

"Yes. Uhura teach Khan. Smart." He was excited by the idea, even though he had already learned a great deal from Jim on the first voyage. Perhaps on the way back, he would be able to express more complex ideas with ease, to answer the questions that were so often asked.

“I’m sure she’ll do a better job than I can do,” Jim confessed. “She’s a real teacher, after all. But I think you’ve learned a lot, Noonien.” He said the name low, so it was only for the two of them. “You have an excellent grasp of so many key concepts of a really complicated language.”

Khan smiled at his friend, and reached out to touch his hand to Jim’s right arm. "Jim teach Khan. Khan learn, more. Thank you." After a moment, Khan nodded his head for the stairs, "Go below. Get dressed." He suggested, wanting to wear more than his robe now that everything had been explained.

“Good idea,” Jim said with a chuckle. “Then, we should have dinner with my mom and Chris. I’m sure he’s brought a lot of good food with him.” He lightly patted Khan on the back and headed for their quarters, offering the other man his hand.

Taking his hand, Khan remained close to Jim as they headed below. Once they were back in their shared room, Khan removed his robe in favor of pants and a shirt. The pants were the loose ones Jim had gotten for him in the India market, but the shirt was American, with buttons down the front.

Jim smiled at the combination outfit and said, “You look very handsome, Noonien. Thank you for showing everyone your other forms. It’s important for them to know the truth about why we’re asking them all to risk their lives. I want you to promise me to be careful, too. The Marcuses are dangerous. They will do anything to try and stop us.” He stepped closer to put a hand on Khan’s shoulder for a second and then lifted the same hand to stroke his hair a few times.

"Yes, Khan careful. Jim careful, yes?" He asked, wanting to make sure Jim made the same promise. Stepping forward to close the remaining distance between them, Khan placed his head on Jim’s shoulder and hugged him gently. "My friend. Be safe."

Jim wrapped his arms around Khan more tightly and rested their heads together. “I promise to be as safe as possible, Noonien, but I know these enemies as not even mom or Chris do. I have been tricked before by them both and since then, stayed several steps ahead. And we must trust Malcolm’s knowledge of soldiering to help us plan the right strategy.” He pressed an affectionate kiss to Khan’s forehead. “We’ll all be as careful as possible.”

"Good. James. Good." Khan said, showing the familiarity of using his name like this since they were alone and sharing this embrace. "Trust friends. Trust Khan. Strong, together."

“We are stronger together,” Jim affirmed. “And we have a good group here. Our own, well, tribe. Stronger because we chose each other. And families you choose are the strongest of all.” He strengthened his hold on his friend and stroked his hair gently. “Let’s go have dinner and then we can get some real sleep.”

"Yes, Jim." Khan said, making soft, happy sounds as Jim continued to embrace him and pet his hair. He enjoyed it a great deal, partly because he had been alone for so long that he was skin hungry for any sort of touch, but also partly because of that way he and Jim had bonded, that Khan wanted that sort of touch in his life all the time. But it was not something he knew how to tell Jim about, or ask for more of. However, he was hoping that having lessons with Uhura would help him be able to express these feelings.
The contented noises made Jim smile, and he wished they had a little more time before needing to get to dinner with his mother and Chris. However, he reluctantly let his friend go and took his hand instead. “How about, after dinner, I brush your hair for awhile?”

Khan smiled at this, "Yes? Brush Khan hair?” He asked, squeezing their hands together briefly before following his friend out of the cabin so that they could join the family for dinner. "Good. Like."

“I thought you might,” Jim said, thinking of the enthusiastic reception for petting. His friend liked being touched, and his hair always provoked positive reactions. “I never thought of myself as being into things like that, but I think I’ll enjoy it, too. Now, let’s endure a million questions at dinner. You know mom will have them ... she always does.”

"Yes." Khan said with a little sigh. Sometimes he was frustrated because he did not know how to answer the questions put to him, but still wanted to be useful and helpful. But it was hard to do if he did not completely understand the question, or how to answer with the words and concepts he knew to express.

Jim frowned and paused in his steps. “I’ll tell her to stop, if you want, Noonien. She doesn’t have any right to badger you with questions you don’t want to answer. Just tell me, and I’ll speak to her. Promise.”

"Answers difficult." Khan said, looking to his friend. But he nodded a little, appreciating that Jim was willing to ask his mother to stop, so that Khan could feel better. "Questions difficult." He said, "Khan, want help. Khan ... head, ouch ... questions difficult."

Jim nodded and said, “I speak English and find mom’s questions difficult. I’ll have to make sure she understands not to fire questions at you so much. I’ll be your shield at dinner tonight and speak more to her tomorrow. What do you think?”

Khan laughed and smiled at this. "Jim, Khan shield?” He found this amusing and sweet and wonderful. With his free hand he tapped Jim on the chest. "Hm, good shield. Good. Yes."

Jim laughed with him, knowing the description was a bit melodramatic. “I’ll try to be a good shield,” he promised and squeezed Khan’s hand lightly. “Mom is a pretty good sword. But I’m her son, so maybe she’ll be a little bit nicer to me.”

"Yes, good shield." Khan smiled at his friend. "Thank you." He said sincerely, appreciating that Jim could see that he was struggling in this area and was standing up for him. Protecting him.

“Whenver you need a shield, I’ll happily be that shield, if I may be of service,” Jim said with soft formality. He renewed their motion toward the dinner with his mom and Chris. “Now, we’ll just try to have an easy dinner.”
Uhura looked up at the clear, blue sky overhead and smiled in gratitude for the calm, warm weather on the first day of lessons with Khan Noonien Singh. In truth, she felt a flutter of nerves in her stomach, not because she was afraid of the amazing man, but because of the importance of what she was to teach and learn. She also took a second to be thankful for always being prepared for any eventuality, which had led her to bring some of her English learning books with her, along with some slates and chalk. Opportunities to teach and learn arrived at the the most unexpected times.

She took a quick glance at the small table and chairs that Sulu had arranged on the deck for their lessons and made sure she had everything in place. With a quick nod of approval, she looked across the deck toward the cabin shared by Jim and Khan, thinking her pupil (and teacher) would be approaching from there.

Wearing a headscarf to keep his long hair from blowing in his face, Khan emerged from his cabin with his own notebook and pencil. He was looking forward to his lessons with Uhura, but was worried that trying to communicate on deck might be difficult if the crew was busy calling directions to one another, or if it proved to be a windy day. But the sky was clear and there appeared to be enough wind in the sails to keep them on their journey, but not overly-so that would interfere with communications. "Hello."

Uhura inclined her head in an elegant greeting and said, “Welcome, Mr. Singh. I am honored by this opportunity to work with you.” She smiled and flipped her ponytail over her shoulder in an easy move. “Your scarf is quite becoming, as well, A clever way to handle long hair.” She gestured to the seat across from her. “Please, sit with me?”

"Thank you. Happy learning, together." Khan said and took a seat, his expression friendly and calm. "Notebook." He said, placing his notebook on the table. "Jim gift Khan notebook." He explained.

“That’s a beautiful notebook,” Uhura said sincerely, knowing how rare paper was. “You and Jim must be close friends for him to give you such a gift. He has also taught you most of what you know in English?” She asked politely, knowing it was a hard language to learn and quietly impressed by how much Khan did understand.

"Yes, Jim and Khan good friends." Khan confirmed. "Jim teach Khan English words. Today, Uhura teach Khan English words." He said with a smile, willing to learn, and understanding that her way might be different than it was with Jim, since much of their communication had been based out of necessity of the moment, to explain to Khan what was happening or where they were going.

“I would like very much to help you with your English,” Uhura confirmed. “Have you been learning to read as well I speak?” She pointed to the notebook, thinking that was a clever way to learn to communicate with each other. “I do not have notebooks and paper to write on, but I have a slate board for each of us.” She indicated the slate board in front of Khan and the one in front of her. “And I have brought readers to learn with.”

"Jim read English for Khan." He said, "Khan read some letters. Speak more." His strength was understanding and speaking English words, not reading or writing them. "Notebook show pictures. Explain ... ideas." He said, opening the notebook to one of the pages that expressed the concept of night, day, summer, spring, autumn, and winter. "Show Khan, slate, please."

“A slate allows us to write and read many times,” Uhura said, lifting her piece, which was bordered by a wood frame. “We write with chalk.” She lifted the chalk. “I'll write my name. Nyota Uhura.”
She wrote the letters on the slate and showed them to Khan. “Can you write your name?”

"Nyota Uhura." Khan repeated back and looked at her writing. "N." He began to identify the letters, though he couldn't remember what Y was, as it looked similar to a V or an X. "O - T - A." He said, able to recognize the other letters. "Khan ... no write name." He said, picking up the chalk, but not knowing where to begin.

“That’s alright,” Uhura said. “Let’s practice together. It’s always nice to know how to write your name. One other thing about slate ... it erases.” She lifted the rag in the center of the table and wiped away the chalk on her slate. “Khan, starts with a K. So, K.” She wrote the letter. “This is a big K, a capital letter. All names start with a capital letter.”

"K" Khan repeated, writing it down on the slate. He knew the letter K, but only now knew it was how his name was started. "Yes, good?” He turned the slate towards her to show his lines, wanting to be sure it was correct.

“Excellent,” Uhura confirmed. “The second letter is an h, if Khan is spelled the same way as currently. A small h.” She drew a small h next to the K, making it Kh. “After, is the vowel in your name, the a. A, e, i, o and u in English are called vowels. Most words have a vowel. In your name, it is an a, small.” She added the a. “And finally, like you said, n.” She put the n on the end of his name. “K-h-a-n. Khan.”

Khan followed her instructions, writing K-h-a-n as she explained each one. "Khan. Good. Can write name.” He said with a smile, showing her at the end to ensure it was still correct.

“Well, that’s part of your name,” Uhura said. “Do you want to learn how to write the rest? Noonien Singh? I think I know how to spell those in English letters.” She smiled encouragingly at her new pupil.

"Yes. Please show." Khan said, and followed her previous example to erase the chalk from the slate so that he would have room to write again.

“So, Noonien. A capital N, which is just the small n, made bigger, like this.” She drew the letter on the slate. “Two os.” She added those after the N. “Another two os before another n, this one small. That makes noon, which is also a work in English, meaning the middle of the day.”


“Exactly,” Uhura said. “That is also called a palindrome. A word spelled forward and backward the same way. Now, to make your name, we add two more vowels and another n. We add an i and an e and the other n. Noonien.”

Khan nodded, taking this information in. It would help to explain some things to Winona in the future, he hoped. But for now he finished writing his name, I - E - N on the slate. "Yes, Noonien. This good.”

“You have good handwriting,” Uhura praised. “More than many who have written English all their life. Now for your last name ... Singh. This is still a fairly common name in India. It means lion. Which is not the same for you? Capital S.” She drew the S. “Lowercase i, n, g and h.” She spelled them out. “Singh. Khan Noonien Singh.”

Khan tilted his head to the side and laughed gently. "Singh, lion? No ... Singh, wolf." He said,
feeling that over the years there must have been some sort of error in translation between languages. "Singrir, wolf... Sing-rir... Singh... wolf." He shook his head, still finding this humorous, but concentrated on the letters. S - I - N - G - H.

“Well, the root of the language may not exactly be the same,” Uhura said. “I am hoping that I can learn your language, as well. Perhaps we can see whose language may have branched from yours. And yes, sometimes, things do not translate as expected.” She looked over his name and nodded a few times. “Well done, Khan. That is your name in English.” She touched the reader in front of him and asked, “Have you seen any of these before? This is a reader, a way of teaching those new to English how to read and speak.”

"Doctor McCoy give gift. Reader. Yes." Khan confirmed while he erased his name from the slate. "What, lesson?" He prompted, aware that many of them were different.

Uhura opened the reader and said, “This is a lesson for those who have learned the basics. Have you learned the alphabet?” She was unsure how Jim might have gone about showing Khan the language, but figured it was probably not at all systematic.

"Yes. A - B - C. Khan know some... forget some." Khan answered.

“We’ll start there,” Uhura said and patiently went through the whole alphabet with Khan, drawing it on her slate. She showed him all of the capital letters and all of the lower case letters in order. “The English alphabet is relatively straightforward, compared to that of some other languages, but is a lot more complex in spelling and grammar.”

"Forget U - V - Y... get confused, shape, some times." Khan said at the end, after Uhura had shown him the alphabet and gone through it several times. When it was printed in a book, he could tell the difference, but sometimes when written by hand, they looked too similar.

“Yes, those are fairly similar letters,” Uhura agreed. “However, they are not commonly used, except for u, so the chances of mixing them up are few.” She smiled encouragement at him and opened their readers. “Want to try a few pages together, before we call it a day?”

"Yes, good." Khan agreed and opened the booklet, though looked to Uhura to explain what he was meant to do.

Uhura opened her book to the first page with words and an illustration of a girl and boy playing with a dog. “The illustrations help you with the words. You can see that this is a boy and girl with a dog. And the words are Jane and Tom play with Spot. Do you see the letters?”

"Hm... yes." Khan said, at first just seeing gibberish on the page. But he knew each letter. J - A - N - E. And then there was a break before the next word, so the first word must be Jane. That was what J - A - N - E sounded like when put together into a word. A name. Jane.

“So, sound them out with me?” Uhura asked and went through each word with Khan carefully. “Good! Now, we’ll try the next page.” She flipped it over to a picture of a dog carrying a bright red ball in his mouth. The words on the page read ‘Spot loves his ball.’ “Will you try reading these aloud to me?”

S - P - O - T. Spot, he had learned that from the previous page. "Spot." Khan began, then started on the next word. L - O - V - E - S. "Lo-ves his b-all." He said, making an attempt.

“Perfect!” Uhura enthused, pleased, if not surprised, by how easily Khan picked up words and remembered them. “Spot loves his ball.” She moved to the next page, which showed Tom throwing
the ball to Spot. The words were ‘Tom throws Spot’s ball. Catch, Spot!’ “Please try these.”

Khan smiled with Uhura, pleased that this was going well. Again some of the words had been on the previous pages so it helped to recognize them in context. "Tom thr-ow-s Spot-s ball. C at-ch. Spot.” Khan said, slowly reading the sentence.

“Thr is a strange pronunciation, isn’t it?” Uhura asked. “Throw. Tom throws. One of the strange letter combinations in English. Tom throws Spot’s ball.” She pointed to the apostrophe. “Do you know what this is?” Considering the way Khan had learned English so far, she doubted it very much.

"Tom throws.” Khan repeated back with a nod, understanding the pattern to THR now. "This, dot?” Khan said, unsure what the dash was meant to be. "Please tell.”

“Well, this is another way English is confusing, but this is called an apostrophe,” Uhura explained. “In this case, it indicates a possessive. The ball belongs to Spot. Therefore, it is Spot’s ball.” She pointed out the way the apostrophe and the s worked together. Picking up her slate, she said, “I’ll show you some more. You are a friend of Jim. Therefore, you are Jim’s friend.” She wrote out the words and showed them to Khan. “Can you do an example?”

Oh, Khan liked this. Jim's friend. But now he had to think of one. Khan considered for a moment, this was Sulu's ship. But he did not know how to spell his name. So he tried to think of something else. "Khan's notebook!” He said suddenly, placing his hand on his notebook that still sat on the table.

“Yes! Exactly!” Uhura beamed at him and wrote out the words on her slate. “Khan’s notebook. See how we spell notebook? That’s two words combined to make a new word. Note and book, a book you take notes in ... a notebook.” She erased her slate and wrote all of that out, as well. “English is complicated, but also, flexible. That’s one of the reasons for the success of the language.”

"Good.” Khan said with a smile, looking forward to being able to show Jim what he learned, by using it in a sentence. "What is- flexible?” Khan asked after a pause.

“Oh. Hmm.” Uhura considered this question a moment. “That’s an English word with two definitions, that also mean similar things. The way I used it, the words means able to adapt to new situations. To new uses. But it can also mean, for a living creature, to be able to bend without breaking.” She stood and stretched a little. “For example, I can bend down to press my hands to the deck.” She demonstrated. “This is a way I am flexible.”

"Khan, adapt. Khan flexible.” Khan said, head tilted to the side as he watched Uhura bend her body, without straining her legs or back. "Flexible. Good." He liked that new word.

“Yes, it is generally good to be flexible,” Uhura agreed. “You are remarkably adaptable to all of the changes you have faced in your life. Being trapped in a temple for so long ... how did you not go mad?” She felt that alone was proof of his strength of mind and flexibility.

"No mad. Friends. Quiet.” Khan said, trying to express that even though he had been alone a long time, he hadn't really been alone. Somehow, time passed without him taking much note of it.

“Well, however you managed, I am glad,” Uhura said, sitting down again. “I believe you have much to offer the world and to me. As a student of languages, I am excited to have a chance to learn yours, if you’ll allow me.” She gestured to the items on the table. “Do you want to continue your lessons?”
"Yes. Good. Please." Khan said with a smile. "Teach Uhura. Yes." He had already done his best to teach Jim, Winona, and Chris some things, but felt that Uhura might understand things they did not, since she had a background in languages, and in teaching.

“Thank you, Khan,” Uhura said and bowed her head in gratitude. This was an unique opportunity to catalog an entirely forgotten language and ensure that it did not go extinct. Perhaps even resurrect its use among their small circle. “Do you want to learn more English today?”

"Yes. More. Please." Khan said with a nod, willing to continue their lessons. It was a fine afternoon for it, and they had nothing but time to fill while on this trip across the ocean.

It had been a restless night for Khan, turning to one side, then the other, trying to sleep. The bed was comfortable enough, and Jim's company kept Khan feeling warm and safe, but still he had difficulty falling asleep. But once he did settle down completely, it had been in the form of a wolf. As which, during the night, had decided that Jim needed to be kept warm and safe too, so had managed to lay on top of his friend, ensuring he did not leave the bed.

The nights at sea had been pleasant so far, the weather mild in a way that was neither overly warm, nor cold. Jim slept in a couple of light blankets and his full sleepwear and felt perfectly comfortable. Therefore, when he was dragged out of slumber by the sensation of being smothered and drenched in sweat, his half-awake brain could not quite comprehend what was going on at first. He flailed a bit to try and get away from the covers and to cool air and encountered soft fur. “Wha-? What’s going on?” he said in a hoarse tone, full of the grit of sleep.

Sleepily, the wolf lifted his head to see what the disturbance was. Jim was in trouble? No. He was fine. There was no one in the room. They were both fine. With a deep sigh, Khan lowered his head onto Jim's shoulders and gave a few light licks, encouraging Jim to go back to sleep.

The tickle of tongue only added to Jim’s confused state, and he battled his way toward being awake enough to comprehend what was happening. His hands batted about and found Khan’s muzzle, which he traced with both hands in slow strokes. “Khan?” he asked and blinked a few times to try and focus on the creature in front of him.

Khan licked at Jim's exploring fingers. He gave a soft huff, indicating yes, he was there. But then rested his head on Jim's chest, wanting him to go back to bed. You are fine. No trouble. You are safe.

“Ugh, hot,” Jim said and began to push at the heavy, overly warm, body. “Noonien. You’re too hot.” He tried to wriggle out from under him, but the strong animal weighed him down a bit too much to escape.

Khan sighed deeply and pushed himself up onto his feet when Jim started to push at him. He grumbled to himself as he walked around the shared bed, then proceeded to curl up on top of Jim's feet, still half asleep.

Jim noted the wolf curled on his feet and slowly sat up, wiping at his forehead with his arm. He yawned and stretched toward the ceiling, before blinking Khan into focus completely. “What are
you doing?” he asked softly and reached out to lightly stroke the large head and strong back of his friend. “You’ve never turned into an animal in the middle of the night before. Are you alright?”

Once more, Khan lifted his head and gave a large yawn, tongue and teeth bared all at once. But he lightly wagged his tail as Jim started to pet him. He was comfortable like this, and felt protective of his friend, even though there was no threat to him on the ship.

“I guess you are,” Jim said and lightly caressed his friend’s cheeks and ears. “Well, you don’t have to sleep at my feet. That seems mean. How about beside me?” He patted the cushion on his left with one hand.

Getting up again, the large wolf padded around in a circle on the bed, working out what space he could claim. Then curling up beside Jim, he wagged his tail again, giving Jim a few licks to the side of his face.

Jim climbed on top of the covers and snuggled up to the wolf, stroking his side. “Sorry for displacing you, Noonien, but you’re a little too warm for a night like this. I think this arrangement will work, though. We can both be comfortable.” He lightly kissed the long snout, all play and silliness.

The wolf blew air out of his nose as a sort of laugh. Then licked at Jim's lips and chin, tail once again thumping against the bedding to show his joy. He was comfortable like this, and even though he was no longer sleeping on top of Jim, he could still keep an eye on him this way just as well.

Jim laughed some more at the playful licks and the way Khan’s tail and eyes showed his happiness. “Yes, you’re a good wolf. A good Khan wolf.” He continued to pet the black fur and even scooted over a bit to give some belly rubs. “I wonder why you changed . . .”

Khan sighed happily, his tail gently wagging against the bed as Jim rubbed his tummy. He pressed a large paw to Jim’s chest, but not wanting to give the impression that he was pushing Jim away, he then lifted his paw and hooked part of his leg over Jim's hip.

“You have me now,” Jim intoned seriously and nodded his head. “I can’t get away from the Khan wolf.” His hand began to make circles in the soft fur, traveling up and down the strong stomach. “You planning to stay this way for awhile?”

Khan huffed softly again, not quite a bark, just a pleasant sound to express that he was in agreement, he was happy. Lightly closing his eyes again, the wolf basked in the touches as he relaxed with Jim, close and within reach.

“Mmm, hope you don’t mind if I go to sleep again,” Jim said, finding the petting soothing. “We’ve only got another week before we dock. Chris and mom and Malcolm and Trip want to go through everything again tomorrow. They’re relentless, Noonien. I think they’re worried about us. They tucker a guy out, as Trip says.”

Khan agreed. They should rest as much as they could, because once they got there, Khan felt there would be little time to take it easy. Khan gave a few gentle licks to Jim's face before settling his head close to Jim's chest, curled in to sleep against him.

“I think you’re worried, too,” Jim whispered as they settled back down. “I’ll be fine, Noonien. I’m tough, and I’ve been through dangerous situations a lot of times.” He yawned again, before smacking his lips tiredly. “And I have you now to look after me. My Khan wolf and Khan lion. Best protectors.”
Yes, Khan did worry about Jim and the events to come, that would likely be the most stressful on Jim, over the rest. He whined softly and snuggled into Jim again. Yes, he would protect him. And Jim would protect Khan in the ways he still did not know he needed. But they were together and that was good. They were strong together.

“You’re the best friend, Noonien,” Jim reassured, sad that he had made Khan whine. He stroked his head. “We’re going to be good. We’ll get through it together. Such a good Khan …” His voice trailed off as his eyelids drooped.

Khan was happy to go to sleep as well, feeling comfortable to remain a wolf for the remainder of the night. He settled in and nodded off again, though this time did not smother Jim in the night with his weight of thick fur.
Chapter 17

Scouting out ahead of the rest of the party, Khan, Jim, and Malcolm were caught up in a seasonal rainstorm that made everything dark, wet, and cold, from early in the morning, through mid-day and late evening, and all night long. It was miserable weather, but expected at this altitude. They were nearing the temple, and all of them were extra alert for signs of the Marcus expedition. Although the ragged trails through the jungle told them that their quarry were not exactly being cautious about their presence.

They ascended a small ridge, and Jim felt every muscle in his back tighten up and his breath run short at the first sighting of the Marcus expedition and camp, collected in a grouping in a small valley below them. They had cleared out a swath of trees next to Khan’s temple and erected their tents alongside, giving them unfettered access to the structure. His teeth ground together when he noticed the large hole they had blown into the entrance to make the way easier, uncaring for the structure itself. That kind of sacrilege marked both father and daughter, despite their learning and many discoveries, as unfit as archaeologists, charged with caring for the past.

“Jim, count how many tents you see,” Malcolm ordered softly. “Khan, tell me how many people. I will look for other signs of their numbers and weaponry.”

Keeping himself low and pressed against the thick growth of jungle trees, Khan moved quietly forward. His hair and clothing were heavy with rainwater, but it also meant that the steady rain helped mask their breathing or conversations. Unfortunately, it did mean that their footprints were prominent in muddy sections, though with so much foot traffic in the area, it would be difficult for the Marcus expedition to single out their prints from the others already there.

Finding a good position, Khan hunkered down for a few minutes and began to the number of people he saw, making relevant mental notes when he saw something that would be useful to know, such as the difference between those who appeared to be hired locals for labour work compared to hired guards who kept rifles in their hands as they moved from tent to tent.

Jim noted Khan move off and watched him for a moment with a hint of worry, before turning back to Malcolm ... only to discover the old Brit had disappeared silently and completely. He shook his head in dismayed envy at the former soldier’s scouting skills. For himself, he poked his head a fraction over their vista point and began to count tents, noting their size and making some educated guesses as to which housed people and in which were the precious artifacts they needed to save. He hated the sheer size of the operation and how much time had elapsed since he had first located Khan and run with him and a few precious items into the jungle and safety beyond. He wished they had been able to stop the Marcuses then, before they caused so much damage and removed so many pieces. He could only hope they had been somewhat merciful.

After a few moments of counting and noting position of all of the camp pieces, he ducked down and eased his way backward to the spot they had agreed upon as a rendezvous whenever they broke apart and needed to meet back up again. Here, he waited for the other two.

Jim was only alone for a few minutes longer before Khan made his way back to him. He was worried and upset. He had understood that the Marcuses were a problem, but did not realize just how destructive a problem they were until he saw it for himself. "Many people.” Khan whispered to Jim. "Count, seven-two. Total. Two-six have guns."

“That tallies for how many tents I saw,” Jim said. “And there may be more people inside the temple. I didn’t see either Marcus. Did you? A woman with blonde hair, lighter than mine, like the corn
silk. And Alexander Marcus is older looking than Chris, losing his hair with a wrinkled face and brown hair.” He figured they were probably inside the temple, but thought Khan might have spotted them.

"No. Did not see." Khan said, though even with those descriptions, he might have seen them without knowing it. "We wait?" He asked, unsure of the next plan of action, since Malcolm was not back with them yet.

Malcolm appeared out of the trees as if summoned by his name and said, “Their set-up is weak in several key areas. The trick to overcoming them will be to lure them out into the open and knock out their mercenaries. Khan, how many guns did you see?"

"Two-six have guns." Khan said, looking to Malcolm. He considered for a few minutes, aware that Malcolm had the most experience in this area, but still wanted to contribute a few ideas of his own. "Yes, no?" He said, wanting the others to listen for a moment and judge his suggestion. "Horses, run away ... men chase horses, into open ... good? Yes, no?"

“That would be useful, yes, once we’re all in position to take advantage,” Malcolm said. “Especially if we can get them away from their encampment. We need a way to make sure we pull away all of their mercenaries, or at least most of them, to even the odds in our favor. I’d also like a look at the set-up in the temple …”

“Is there any kind of back entrance they might not have found?” Jim asked Khan, also wanting to see what state the temple was in after so long under the Marcus’ ‘loving’ care.

"Front entrance and ... tree entrance." Khan said, only aware of the front passage with the stone walls. And of course, where the tree roots had managed to sneak in over the years, breaking apart large sections of stone.

“Tree entrance?” Jim asked, unsure of what that meant. “Is there some way to get in through the trees?” He thought that might be a good way to look down at the scene inside without being noticed. “Can you take us there, Khan?”

Khan considered a moment then nodded. "Yes. Show you, now?" He asked, unsure if they were meant to initiate the distraction of the men guarding the compound first, or go to where the tree roots entered into the temple.

Malcolm said, “Yes, let’s look at the temple. This will also give us a back way in. I’m thinking we’ll want some folks stationed at the entrance to keep Marcus’ people from holing up in there. And if we can drop some people in quietly, they’ll be able to root out anyone already inside. But let’s tread carefully, gentlemen.”

"Yes, show you now." Khan said and lead the way. He guided the two men the long way around, as he felt that was the safest means. The thick jungle and the constant rain kept their silhouettes invisible as Khan guided them to the back part of the temple, covered with rocks, dirt and trees from mudslides and storms over the many hundreds and thousands of years. Climbing up this mound, Khan silently pointed out several spots where the massive trees reached into the rock with their roots and took hold, breaking weaker sections.

Jim wiped rain off his face and studied the area Khan indicated. “Oh, natural entrances,” he murmured and after a quick check of their surroundings, began to climb the rock walls of the temple. “If we can find one higher up, we can see what’s going on inside.”

“Keep your voice down,” Malcolm cautioned, even over the rain. He scrambled up the slippery
walls like a much younger man, examining the various holes left by roots and branches. “I’ll stay here and keep watch for anyone approaching on this side,” he said, finding a position. “We’re shielded from sight of their camp, as long as you stick to this side. Khan, please go with Jim.”

Khan nodded his understanding. Most of the breaks in the stone were small, only leaving openings large enough for rain water to drip down into the temple, maybe sunlight, mice or snakes, but certainly nothing large enough for a human to fit through. Still, Khan headed closer to the top of the temple, where one of the many large trees still sat, settled heavily, roots digging deep into the temple. Here there were a few natural hollows that had made for bird nests in the past, with a few more openings.

Jim cursed softly as a bit of stone came away under his right hand, causing him to slip and bash his shoulder into the temple. The pouring rain sheared away more of the rock below his right hand, and he reached higher, scrabbling for a hold for a moment, before his fingers found solid purchase again. With a little grunt of pain, he hauled himself up and continued his trek toward one of the very highest trees.

"Jim?" Khan called out as quietly as he could, but the concern was clear as he stared at his friend. "Pain? Stop? Quiet." He said, not wanting to push their small advantage, if it meant risking Jim to injury, or them being discovered.

Jim paused in his climb and looked over at Khan through the water dripping down his face. He smiled at him and said, “I’m fine, Noonien,” since they were out of range of any other ears, including Malcolm’s below. “Just a little slip. This rain is making everything more difficult ... at least it’s harder for them to see or hear us.” He continued on his way with a quick jerk of his head to indicate where he was going. “I want to get to the top.”

"Yes, Jim." The smile did reassure him, a little. But even so, Khan remained close to Jim, moving slowly up the mix of tree and rock, looking for any significant openings as they did. "Careful. Do not hurt self."

Jim glowed a little at Khan’s obvious solicitation for his health and smiled down at him. “I promise.” He skirted around the edge of a particularly large tree and said in a quieter voice, “Here, Noonien. I can see in …” He gazed into the center chamber of the temple, and there, as he suspected, he laid eyes on Alexander and Carol Marcus. A shiver not from the chill rain swept through him, and he diverted his eyes to their surroundings. But that did not make for any relief, as he saw the horrible damage the Marcuses had done to Khan’s chamber. The carefully preserved remains of people were all gone, with only a few pathetic remnants of those considered too damaged to be of any worth. The center slab had been hauled up and the floor torn away, an obvious search for something beneath. All of the valuables were stripped and even portions of the fancily decorated walls had been chipped off and packaged. Those items with little or not enough monetary value to the party were mostly discarded or smashed. “Oh, Noonien,” he breathed, “I’m so sorry.”

As Khan looked in on the tomb he had lived in for so long, a deep frown became hard and chiseled on his face. This did not look anything like the magnificent room he had been in. "Where are, my people?" He asked, on the verge of tears to see that they were gone, and therefore no longer at rest. "All ... broken."

“We’ll get them back,” Jim promised, putting a hand on Khan’s nearest arm. “They’ll have them put in shipping containers in some of their tents. We’ll get as many as we can back to where they belong in your temple.” He pressed close to his friend and stared down at the Marcuses, face suddenly becoming hard and fierce, all traces of the pain once caused him gone. “They’ll regret that they ever defiled your place.” He did a quick survey of the room for more practical purposes, knowing
Malcolm would expect him to and that they needed the information. He stroked Khan’s wet hair once as he finished. “Let’s find another way in.”

"Yes, Jim." Khan said and followed after his friend, after looking at the Marcuses one last time. He would remember them, in anger. His people deserved to be treated with care and respect, and in peace. They had served Khan in life, and in death, loyal and loving companions for all the long years Khan had been alone in the tomb. The others might not share Khan’s beliefs, but their bones still represented who they were to Khan, and were to be treated well.

Jim found moving down a bit more challenging than up, since he could not see his feet as well. However, he successfully made his way to another large tree with roots dug deep into the stone walls. “Here,” he called to Khan. “I think we could get in this way.” He peered into what looked like an adjoining chamber, this one in better condition that the main. The objects here were not as precious as the others, so they had been left to be cataloged and stolen until later. “If we can get in here, we can drive them out the front. And make sure this room remains mostly undamaged.”

"Yes, Jim." Khan said, looking in on the smaller room, then to his friend. "Jim." He said quietly. "Am ... angry." He admitted, having not felt this emotion to the best of his memory, or at the very least, in a long, long time. He did not know what to do with this feeling, except to tell Jim about it.

Jim found a way to settle on his side next to Khan and gave him a hug as best he could from their position perched on the rocky side of the temple in the storm. “I am, too,” he said quietly. “I didn’t know I would be this mad at what they’ve done ...but I am. You have every reason to be angry, Noonien. They had no right to hurt this place. And they’ve hurt you.”

Yes, no right. Jim had not hurt him or any of his people. The Marcuses had no right to treat his people so badly. To steal his things. They were the selfish side of mankind that the gods did not like. "They must leave. Gods, not happy. Gods, speak through Khan, not happy."

“Our people will be in place by the day-after-tomorrow,” Jim said softly. “Will the Gods be alright waiting for them? We’ll make plans to drive away the Marcuses and try to make things as right as possible.” He stroked Khan’s hair, barely feeling it beneath his cold hand.

"Work together. I understand." Khan said, aware that there was a plan in place and that he could not simply take this suddenly upon himself, because of his current anger. He would wait. "Go back down?" He said, looking to Jim to kinder eyes, "Jim cold. Jim wet."

“Jim cold and wet,” he agreed with a little shiver. “And we’ve done our job and found a way inside. Let’s go get Malcolm and then get back to our little campsite. I could use a change of clothes and some food.” Jim pressed a kiss to Khan’s forehead and added, “And perhaps tonight, we can ask the Gods for help in driving away the Marcuses forever?”

"Yes, Jim." Khan said quietly, looking at his friend. He did not move right away, but turned his head to the side and gave Jim a kiss to the side of his face. His lips were warm in comparison, not affected by the cold, just extremely damp. "We go."

Jim shuddered at the warm brush of lips over his cold skin and blinked a few times at Khan, unknowing of how soft and desiring his eyes were as they gazed at his friend. But the situation cleared his head quick enough, and he said, “Carefully. This temple is harder to get down than up. And the rain is not helping.”

"Yes, we go careful." Khan said and started down first. He felt that if Jim lost his footing or slipped again, he would slide into him, and Khan would be able to catch him. But he moved slowly, keeping aware of his own footing, but also any sounds that might indicate they were making themselves
known prematurely.

Jim smiled at Khan’s careful moving to keep under him and followed him down, respecting the care the other man was showing him in being his protector. The rain continued in a drenching torrent, and the wind began to pick up now, making the conditions even more miserable for their descent. “It’s like the weather is angry, too,” he said, glancing down at Khan. He noted Malcolm not far below them now, keeping his eagle eye out on the jungle beyond to all sides. Occasionally, the Brit looked up, and Jim registered when he caught sight of them and straightened out a bit. He smiled and nodded down at the other man, who waited for them to reach his level. “We propose going back to our shelter now,” he said.

“Quite right,” Malcolm said, seemingly unaffected by the weather. “We’ve done all we can. We’ll rendezvous with our party tomorrow afternoon and finalize our strategy.”

"Jim, hurt?" He asked again, now that they were moving away from the camp. Jim had said he was fine, but Khan felt that was because he still wanted to move forward with their reconnaissance mission. Now that they were going back to camp, maybe he would admit to needing attention.

They were trekking back through the jungle now, circumventing the Marcus encampment to return to their own hidden shelter. Since they’d hit the ground, the three had mostly been silent, so Khan’s unexpected question caught Jim off guard. “Hurt? Oh. My shoulder. Maybe a little. Nothing serious. We can check it out at camp, if you want.” He offered a warm smile to his friend and lightly bumped into him on his good side. “Thank you.”

"Yes." Khan nodded at his friend. He brushed his hands through his hair, using his fingers like a comb to work through the wet strands of hair, getting it off his face. "Sit. Get warm. Get dry. Help Jim.”

"Yes, we can do that when we get there,” Jim agreed. “We’ll have to agree on a lookout system. We can’t afford not to have someone on guard at all times. And Malcolm is older than me …” He paused as the Brit glanced back, seeming to have ears like a cat’s. He smiled at the other man and said, “And is definitely more able than me in every way.” The Brit smirked and looked away, making Jim breathe out a little.

“We’ll have time for a bit of taking care of ourselves before we need worry about the rest,” Malcolm said from his place a few steps ahead and to the side of them. He seemed to know where he was going instinctively, like the other two. They were a well matched trio for this scouting party.

"Good." Khan said, keeping close to Jim all the way back to camp. "Dry clothes, important." He said with a little smile. The situation with the temple and his friends bodies being disturbed still bothered him very much, but taking care of Jim and Malcolm gave him something else to focus on.

“And warm,” Jim said. “We must not forget the warm part. I feel like a drowned rat.” He swiped some water off his face. “Khan, when you said you could get the horses away from the Marcus camp, what did you mean?” He had a notion that Khan did not mean to steal into the camp and spook them all off.

"Wolf-Khan, tell them to go ... tell them, bad people, run away ... horses will listen to Wolf-Khan.” Khan said with a nod. They would also listen to Lion-Khan and Khan as a man, surely just as well, but he felt taking wolf form would be the most practical. And the fact that the first horse and first wolf had an alliance between them in the beginning, so that even so many generations later, they would still respond to it on some level.

Jim stared at him a moment and opened his mouth, when Malcolm said, “We’re almost there.
Everyone look sharp and make sure we have no intruders. Fan out.” He waved his hand for them to disperse and vanished into the trees a second later.

“We can talk back at the tents. Be careful,” Jim said and nodded once to Khan. He moved to the left, fanning out and moving slowly toward their camp, on the alert for any signs of intruders.

Following the instructions given, Khan worked his way around the perimeter of their camp. He was careful to look for signs that someone else had been there recently, or was still there, but only saw the prints of a few jungle animals. Still, he took the time to walk in a half circle around the camp, slowly spiraling inwards until he reached their tent.

Malcolm emerged first from the jungle, knife in one hand and gun in the other, ready to take on anyone who might be lurking. But he relaxed as he reached their shelter to find it empty, with no signs of any intruders of the human kind. He put away his weapons and arranged the flaps of their shelters to allow them to take cover from the rain and strip without getting the insides all wet.

Jim noted that Malcolm had cleared the area and paused at the edge of their encampment to wait for Khan. He had so many questions for his friend, but also wanted to make sure he emerged unscathed ... from what danger, he could not say, but the need remained.

"See, good and safe." Khan said, meaning that he did not see any bad signs, but that the area he covered was safe and secure. "Good and safe, also?" He asked the others as he approached.

“Yes, everything is secure,” Jim said, reaching out to take Khan’s right hand. “We can relax and get ourselves dry and warm, before we eat.” He headed toward the shelter the two of them shared, still holding Khan’s hand.

Malcolm had already started peeling off his soaked clothes, setting aside his boots to work on later. “Be nicer if we could chance a fire, but there’s still too much risk involved. We’ll have to use our spare blankets to help dry and get ourselves warm.” He disappeared into his tent, stripped down to his underclothes, to fetch his blankets and dry garments.

"Yes, not good for fire, now.” Khan said as he too began to undress. "We stay close. Stay warm." He suggested as he put on a dry shirt, and pulled his wet hair up, off the back of his neck. He brushed his hands through it a few times, then covered it with a headscarf to conserve the heat coming off the top of his head, so that it would help dry out his wet hair.

“A very traditional approach,” Malcolm said in his very British way from the inside of his tent. “You should definitely do that.” There was rustling as he fetched items, along with a few very British curses.

Jim grinned at Khan, already stripped to his pants and underclothes, as well. “We can share a blanket, Noonien. Do you want to get us one? Or shall I?” He squirmed out of pants that were tight with water and spread them out with a plop on the ground to dry. “Sheesh.”

"Khan will get blankets.” Khan said, and went to sort through their supplies to do so. But he looked at Malcolm with some curiosity. "Are you cold? Sit with Jim and Khan? Get warm?” He invited the other man with sincere concern and as a show of friendship, not knowing that perhaps that was not an appropriate thing to offer. But Malcolm was a friend now, and friends needed to be taken care of.

Malcolm chuckled and said, “I’m well enough, old man. I don’t have the height or hair of either of you. Not as much to get wet. I’ll be right as rain soon enough. Don’t worry about me.” He disappeared under his blanket, only the tip of his nose poking out, as he took a seat at the entrance to his tent.
"We can share," Jim said with a bright smile for Khan. "Let me just get out of these." He gestured to his small clothes and headed into the shelter to discard them and change into a dry pair of just the briefs. A moment later, he darted out and headed for the blanket Khan held. "Cold!"

Khan wrapped the blanket around Jim tightly. Then guiding him over to their sleeping spot, Khan sat them both down so that they could curl up together. "Jim, cold. Khan, warm." He said and began to rub his hands over Jim's hands and fingers to start warming him up and getting the healthy blood circulating.

"You're not cold?" Jim asked as he cuddled into the other man. "Oh. You're not. In fact, you're almost toasty." He let out a contented sigh as he soaked in the warmth of his friend's body and basked in the gentle hands that caressed his skin. "Noonien," he whispered for only his friend to hear, "what would be the best way to ask the Gods for their blessings on our endeavor to protect your temple and win against the Marcuses?"

"Khan not cold. Khan wet, only." He said with a small smile as he cuddled against his friend, helping him regain a healthy body temperature. But he considered Jim's question with all seriousness. "Jim want to ask Gods for protection? Blessing?" The last time Khan had tried to introduce Jim to a blessing, Jim did not want to do it.

"Protection for your temple and our group," Jim said softly. "I want to make sure everyone gets through safely and we succeed. That's really selfish of me ... but I care too much about all of them and the condition of your temple not to." He bit his lower lip and looked into Khan's eyes. "I want to know I've done everything to get them on our side." His hands went to lightly caress Khan's chest and than up to stroke his still wet hair.

"Not selfish. Blessing for friends. Blessing for good people. Blessing not selfish." Khan said, watching and listening to Jim, feeling that there was something different about his touches this time. "Jim and Khan can ask for blessing. People blessing. Land blessing. Separate." He said with a little smile, leaning into the touch of Jim petting his hair.

"What is the difference?" Jim asked, more than just curious, although that also fueled his question. He felt he could do whatever was the best now because he was close to Khan, so it would not be the wrong it might have been before. He wanted to be closer, too, though he did not want to speak more of it until Khan was further settled into this time and his life.

"Hm." Khan considered how to explain. "Example. Woman wants baby. Baby blessing, good for woman, good for baby, good for family. Example. Man wants land healthy. Land blessing. Good for land. Good for village." He said, then added. "Jim wants people blessing. Good for friends. Protect in war. Jim must speak names of friends into Wolf ear." In the past that was a very scary thing to do, though required less courage from Jim since he was so comfortable with Khan no matter his wolf or lion form. "Be brave. Speak names. Protect friends."

"Yes, I want to do that," Jim said seriously. He was without fear in this regard, for what did he have to fear from Khan? His friend was just that, his friend, no matter his from. "And for the land blessing?"

"Land blessing, different." Khan said shyly, knowing how Jim had responded to the union blessing. "Is a great gift, to give of self ... Khan must give of self ... must ..." Well this was difficult to explain, he did not have the word for it, as it was not exactly something mention in children's books. "Give body fluid? Give to land. Jim help Khan, give to land."

Jim felt a slight flush on his own cheeks, even though he had expected a similar explanation. "Not exchange body fluid?" he asked softly. "Khan and Jim together?" He forced himself to speak
"Land blessing, different from Union Blessing." Khan said, doing his best to explain. "Jim and Khan together. Jim touch Khan. Touch Khan, hands. Touch Khan, mouth. Khan give body fluid. Jim catch. Give to land." Khan said, then mimed the possibility of Jim having something in the palm of his hand, or in his mouth, which he then spat into his hand, only to press to the ground. A gift to the land, of Khan's fluids.

“Oh,” Jim said and nodded a few times as he considered the idea carefully. “And this is a powerful blessing? The Gods will like?" he asked. “Noonien will like?” He wanted to be sure of both things before they went on. “And what is Union Blessing?”

"Yes, strong blessing. Good for land." Khan said and held Jim's hand again to warm up his fingers. "Gods will like. Noonien will like." He assured. He played with Jim's fingers a little, massaging around the knuckle and then the palm of his hand. "Khan tried Union Blessing with Jim. Before. Jim did not want. Union Blessing, give thanks to Gods. Connect to Gods."

JIm took a deep breath and said, “When you asked before, Jim did not know Khan very well. Khan did not know Jim. Now, we know each other better, so if we win, Khan and Jim will thank gods. Khan and Jim will also thank each other, bless each other, be close to each other. For tonight, we will do land blessing. Tomorrow, people blessing? Will that work?"

"Yes, Jim. Good." Khan purred softly and leaned in to kiss his friend on his cheek, smiling as he sat back again. "Jim agree to land blessing? Jim, understand?" Khan asked, wanting to be certain. "Jim and Khan, together."

"Just Jim get seed from Noonien," Jim said, a little confused about this new explanation, versus what he thought the method was. "Jim can use mouth or hand. Does Khan need to make noise? Say words?" He glanced over at Malcolm. "Friend Malcolm not understand."

"Jim can use mouth or hand. Yes. Khan will say words, at end." Khan said with a tilt of his head. "Land blessing upset Malcolm?" He considered for a time, "We do not need to do land blessing, if make friend unhappy."

Jim chuckled and said, “Sex is ... not open now. Religion of most of people from my country and Malcolm's country say only for children. Anything else is bad. Between two men, say it is evil. Cursed. So, Malcolm not understand maybe.” He glanced over at their companion, still swathed in his blanket. “Maybe he does. Malcolm special."


“Sex for Jim different,” Jim said and lowered his voice further. “Jim no agree with religion. But for
Jim, sex is for lovers. For people who love each other and want to show lover and care for each other for a long time. Was not like that always. Once, Jim thought sex for fun only ... but Carol change Jim. No more sex for fun. Sex for people Jim trusts and wants to be close with. Before Jim not know Khan well enough to be close. Now, Jim and Khan best friends. Best. Jim think be good ... and want to thank Gods right if we survive and win. Must thank Gods right."


"Yes," Jim said. "I think Noonien will be a good lover. And the Union Blessing will be perfect after …" He shivered and pressed closer to Khan, murmuring, “Jim is afraid. I am afraid. There are a lot of them, with guns. They won’t hesitate to kill us all.” He paused and said, “I will volunteer for the most dangerous part. It’s my responsibility. And we will ask for blessings. I will do anything to try and keep us all safe.”

Wrapping his arms around his friend, Khan cuddled against him, wanting them both to remain close and warm. "Good Jim. Many friends. All, responsible. All work together. We fight. We win. Is good." Khan nuzzled his face into the soft hairs of Jim's head. "Khan keep Jim safe. Keep friends safe. Gods protect the good."

“Thank you,” Jim said softly and kissed his face on both cheeks, before sealing their mouths for a long moment. He parted from him and traced his fingers down from Khan’s neck to his chest and continued lower, approaching his groin with care. “May I touch you, Noonien? May we performed the Land Blessing?"

Khan smiled after their first kiss, and sucked on his lip a moment, savoring the taste of Jim that still lingered there. It was exciting to know that Jim was willing to kiss and touch. "Yes, Jim ... James. Yes, you touch Noonien. Is good." Khan said, petting his hand down Jim's back. "Jim not afraid. Khan friend. Will not hurt."

“But we can’t be too loud,” Jim cautioned. “Malcolm is right over there.” He allowed his fingers to brush over the impressive bulge covered by rough, but strong, fabric. “And we cannot take too long, much as I’d like to linger. We’ll linger later. Yes?” He nuzzled Khan’s cheek, even as he peeled away the layer that kept his fingers from flesh.

Khan still did not understand why they had to be quiet, or quick. Even though Jim had explained it, that was now how these things worked. But he was going to try for his friend to keep it quick, since that is what he wanted. A rushed, secretive blessing did not sit well in his mind. But this was how Jim wanted things. "Yes Jim. Gentle hands and kiss. Khan give quick."

“I’m sorry we can’t do more,” Jim murmured. "It’s been a long time, but I’d like to." He wrapped his prepared fingers around the firm flesh, working it slowly from bottom to top and top to bottom,
familiarising himself with girth and breadth and roughness. “Top off being so handsome, you’re a regular bull moose.”

Khan sighed deeply as he relaxed, also becoming familiar with Jim's touch. "Jim can use mouth. Jim can use hands. Jim is good." Khan said, reaching up to pet his golden hair, then kiss the side of his face. "Jim good." He encouraged, as his erection quickly responded.

“No time for my mouth,” Jim murmured. “I’d want to linger ... and probably swallow. No good for land blessing.” He tilted his head to accept the kisses pressed there. “Does Khan want to touch, too? You can, you know, if you want. Just- I shouldn’t release right now. But you can touch me wherever you want.”

"Thank you, Jim. Good gift. Give of your body." He praised, "Khan first. Khan blessing, first." He said, understanding that the land blessing was the priority and therefore needed to be done quickly. His hips rolled slowly at the continued touches from the man he considered a friend.

Jim took a shaky breath and confessed, “I don’t only want to touch you because of the blessings, Noonein. Please believe me.” He nuzzled at Khan’s face and kissed him softly, as his hand took on a quicker pace, coaxing pleasurable response out of his partner. “You have many charms, my friend.”

Oh. That was important to know. Jim was interested in the blessings, yes, a spiritual practice, but he was also interested in being close to Khan, when it was not about a blessing. For pleasure. "Jim and Khan, as lover?" He asked, wanting to clarify this concept between them. He looked at Jim, curious and interested in his response, but also wanting to kiss his lips.

“Even for the blessing, I wouldn’t have taken you to bed if I didn’t want that,” Jim said sincerely. “I don’t do that anymore,” He did not allow their conversation to slow his attentions or distract from finding the spots that made Khan grow harder. “I want to be your lover.”

Khan smiled and kissed Jim on the lips now, sucking gently. "Good." He purred. "Khan, good to Jim. Jim, good to Khan. Good lover." He gasped softly as he let his hips buck into Jim's hand. He kept his mouth closed as he groaned, mindful of remaining quiet. After a few more strokes, Khan managed to come into Jim's hand, but instead of enjoying it, began to speak the blessing in his language through soft gasps of breath.

Jim nearly gasped at how quickly Khan finished, but also felt grateful, given their current situation. “I pour your offering on the ground?” he asked softly, wanting to be sure he made the right move now. It would be terrible to mess up at the end. He pressed a series of kisses all over Khan’s face, even as he did.

"Yes, Jim. Place hand on ground, offering into earth." He said, cupping the back of his hand over Jim's so that they did it together. As the ground was blessed, birdsong began to fill the jungle and the rain began to die down to a light trickle and mist. "Good, Jim. Ground blessed."

Jim noticed the immediate change in the rain and the wildlife and blinked at Khan. “Is that from us?” he asked. “Did we make that change in the weather and animals?” He touched Khan’s face with his clean hand and stroked his cheek tenderly. “We did that right? The land is blessed properly?”

"Yes, Jim." Khan smiled at his friend. "Land is blessed." He kissed Jim again, sucking at his lips, but paused after a moment, wanting to be sure he was still interested, even though it was no longer for a blessing ceremony.

Jim smiled and wrapped both arms around Khan, tugging him in for a long kiss. He licked eagerly at
his lips, asking for entrance, or for Khan’s tongue, whatever he preferred. His legs spread, the hardness of his own erection now pressing against his new lover in an eager fashion. If not for Malcolm, so quiet and still from his own side that Jim believed the other man knew damn well what was going on, he would have been loud in his demands and words. As it was, he fought to keep from being too obvious.

Khan parted his lips for Jim, his tongue meeting halfway as they kissed each other, fully and deeply for the first time. Khan had wanted this more then a few times before, but had been unsure until now, that his friend was willing and wanting the same thing. Wrapping his arms around Jim and holding him on his lap, Khan purred softly, petting his hand down Jim's back.

Jim made a startled noise and pushed gently at his shoulders. In this position, they were completely exposed, especially kissing. “Noonien,” he whispered and then sighed a little, shaking his head. He eased himself forward to just fully straddle Khan’s lap and gave into his lover’s enthusiasm, sealing their mouths again and accepting Khan’s tongue inside. He felt warm and protected and wanted all at once, a combination he never expected to feel since Carol’s betrayal. It was heady and made him squirm in desire.

Khan enjoyed being able to kiss Jim. For all the times as a wolf or a lion that he could lick his friend on the face, he had not been allowed to do it as a man. He continued to rub his hands up and down Jim's back, though pulled his head back a moment to look his friend in the eyes. "No?" He asked, unsure about why Jim had shook his head and pushed at him. "Khan stop?"

Jim smiled, eyes lit as they gazed at his lover. “No need to worry now. Malcolm has noticed by now, Noonien. No sense trying to be cautious anymore.” He dotted kisses all over Khan’s face, before reaching down to lightly stroke Khan’s groin, testing his need. “Will you be ready again soon? I’d like to give you real pleasure this time.”

"Yes, Jim." Khan smiled at him, his gaze fixed completely on his friend. "Khan touch, here?" He asked, looking for permission as he slid his hand under Jim's shirt, seeking out his skin. "Yes?"

Jim shrugged out of the shirt and his underclothes with smooth gestures, showing skills he had not used in awhile. “You can touch me anywhere you want. However you want. I want to feel your hands everywhere, my Noonien. Please.” He reached out to grasp Khan’s hands and lightly urged them to his chest.

"Thank you, Jim. Good. Khan happy." He said with a smile and kissed him again. He slid his hands up Jim's chest, taking the time to touch the frame of his body, following lines of muscle and bone, feeling close to his friend because of it. "James, is friend. James, is lover." He said quietly and began to kiss Jim down his neck and across his throat.

“Yes,” Jim hummed softly and raised his head to get more kisses on his chin and neck. “That feels so good, Noonien. Love how you feel against me. Warm and strong and caring. I trust you.” His voice hitched at the end, laden with emotion. But he continued to keep it low, so as not to annoy Malcolm too much. “My Noonien.”

"Want to stay close to you. Want to stay your friend. Want to be lover." Khan said, kissing at Jim's chin and neck. "Before ... not much English words, now can talk feelings? Now can tell Jim, stay forever? Happy with Jim. Now can tell Jim, never leave. Now can tell Jim, want to touch, want to kiss.” He said, moving both their bodies so that they laid down together in the mix of discarded clothing and blankets.

Jim tightened his hold on Khan and basked in the words, even as his heart sped up to an almost frightening pounding in his ribs. “Stay forever?” he whispered. “You mean that, Noonien? You’ve
been wanting to tell me? You know you can stay for as long as you want no matter what, right? Even if we were not lovers. I promise. I'll never force you to leave, Noonien. I know you'd never do anything that might make me want to.” He pressed their foreheads together.

"Yes." Khan purred warmly, nuzzling their faces together, much like his lion-half. "Now can tell Jim, touch lion, touch wolf, touch Khan also. Tell Jim ... heart says, stay close." He said, rubbing his hand over Jim's hip, cuddled close together.

Jim felt his face warm at the implication of those words and said, “I don’t believe I am good enough for you, Noonien. But I want to be.” He pressed his groin into Khan's with a deliberate wiggle to try and entice him to move, looking forward to the grind of their bodies together. “Please, Noonien, I want you. We don’t have much more time. We need to eat and finish setting up before it gets dark. But I want to do this right. Want to be with you.”

"Jim is good." Khan said with a smile, lightly kissing his lips. Sliding his hand from Jim's hip, over his thigh and across his cock, Khan continued to keep strong eye contact with his lover as he used the back of his hand to stroke Jim gently. Then thrusting his own hips forward, Khan used his hand to hold both of their erections together, rubbing and sliding together.

Biting back a few choice curse words, Jim did moan low in his throat at the thrust of hard flesh to hard flesh. His body responded to the movements instinctively and knowledgeably, picking up a rhythm not practiced in far too long. He grasped Khan’s back and lightly scored the flesh with the marks of his nails, delighted with the pleasure that surged through him. His lover made the feelings even more intense, since it was Khan, whom Jim felt so close to.

"Good, good." Khan purred. Perhaps it was the stress of the events to come, that pushed Jim to seek such an outlet with his friend, but Khan did not think on it for too long. Their feelings and attraction was mutual. That was what mattered. His hips bucked as Jim scratched at his back and he began to slide his hand over their cocks, squeezing and pressing for both their pleasure.

Jim loved the purring and sought out Khan’s mouth to thank him for it with deep kisses and little nips. “You make me feel so good, Noonien. Not just like this. Always.” He felt himself approach climax much faster than he was used to, but not unexpectedly, given the circumstances. “I’m close,” he murmured. “Just a little more.”

"Yes, good." Khan tucked his face close to Jim's neck, kissing and nuzzling the skin. His hips thrust, pushing them both while his fingers teased and stimulated the heads of their erections. Khan could feel the strong pulse from Jim, throb against his own cock. He gave a soft whine of pleasure as he felt himself find release again, this time enjoying it more because it was a shared experience.

Climax caused stars to dance behind Jim’s eyes, and he muffled himself by burying his face into Khan’s shoulder. His hips bucked out of control against Khan’s firm hold, copious fluid soaking between them. So much time had elapsed since the last time he had a sexual partner that the orgasm lasted longer than usual, too, until he thought he might literally explode from the sensations.

Sliding his hand up and down, even after they both spilled their seed, Khan continued to touch, milking every last drop. He purred deeply, the rumble in his chest vibrating against Jim as he wrapped his other arm around his lover, holding him tight. "Good. Jim and Khan, good. Stay together. Happy."

Jim felt his sides heave with his breaths, still muffled against Khan’s warm skin. He eased his own grip a little on his lover, stroking his hair with one shaky hand. “I am happy,” he murmured into Khan’s ear, setting his lips near the shell. “So happy. I feel so good right now.” With a hint of mischief and deep affection, he nibbled at the lobe and tugged playfully.
Khan laughed softly, but clearly enjoyed Jim nipping at his ear. His body, which was already warm, flushed hot, much like when he was a wolf, with thick black fur. "Jim and Khan, together. Good. Hold. Happy."

With a little sigh, Jim loosened his hold a bit more and pulled back to look into Khan’s eyes. "Happy," he agreed softly. "Thank you." He lifted his head and pressed a kiss to his nose.

“We should be having dinner now.” Malcolm sounded like he always had, though his voice ringing through the air startled Jim more than a little. “Dark’s coming fast. We need to get some rest before we meet up with the others tomorrow. At least the rain’s slackened.” There was rustling from his shelter.

Jim stifled giggled into Khan’s neck, a bit embarrassed, but also amused by the other man’s complete normality.

"Gentle rain. Good. Happy land. Birds sings. Happy birds." Khan said, petting his hand down Jim's back with a smile. He still did not share the embarrassment that Jim did, as he did not have the same social reservations about sexuality. "Eat dinner now. Then rest. Good."

“Oh, the land blessing! I almost forgot,” Jim said with a little grin. “They are still making a racket, aren’t they? I hadn’t even noticed.” He rubbed his nose against Khan’s and then shifted so he could peeks outside of their cozy blanket nest. Noting that the coast was clear, he emerged from the blankets, carrying his underclothes, and headed back into their shelter to fully dress.

Still mostly dressed from before, Khan only needed to secure his pants once more before he stood. "Good omen ... land has been ... unhappy ... happy, now." He said, trying to express that until the land blessing, the trees and the land and the animals had been under something of a dark cloud, likely due to the activities of the Marcusses. But now that they were here, things would change for the better.

“I’m glad,” Jim said as he pulled on a full outfit and emerged back into the front, “I didn’t know you could feel that from this place. Can you feel it everywhere? Can you tell if all places are unhappy or happy, Noonien?” He wondered what their farm was back home, if Khan had sensed anything there.

“Yes, Khan can feel. Most." He said, trying to explain, though did want to clarify one place he did not get a sense of very well. "Ocean, difficult." But to be fair, both signs he represented were earth-bound, the lion as a symbol of the desert and the sun, and the wolf as a symbol of rocks and mountains and the moon.

Jim considered this and nodded a few times. “If a place we care about feels sad, please tell me. I can help you ... with blessings and stuff.” He squeezed Khan’s arm and hustled over to Malcolm’s shelter, where the man was busy digging through their supplies. “Can I do anything to help?”

Malcolm looked up with a brief smile and said, “Yes, you can help me get out the cold rations. I know we packed them. Also, which watch do you want?”

“Yes, Jim. Will tell you, if land sad.” Khan said and followed after Jim to the other part of the shelter. Khan watched the two men interact for a moment before he asked, "Malcolm cold?" Jim had the opportunity to warm up with Khan, but Malcolm had been on his own, so Khan wanted to ensure he was well.

“Thank you, old man, I’m well warmed again,” Malcolm said. “A blustery storm like that is rather like what the old country’s like. A land of rain and cold, our Emerald Isle.” He chuckled to himself
and made a noise of pleasure when he located their cold stores. “Now, about the watch?”

“I’ll take second,” Jim said, “unless either of you objects.” He’d found that was the hardest watch, having that kind of interrupted sleep pattern. “I think Khan should get the last, as I’m sure he’ll be the most alert at that time. And you should go first, Malcolm.”

“Yes. Can go last. Be alert.” Khan said, sitting down with the other two so that they could eat together. Khan considered Malcolm a moment before he asked, "Khan home, near-same as Malcolm home?"

Malcolm chuckled again and shook his head. “Not hardly, old bean,” he said. “My country does not have jungles like these, nor even the savannas. We are always green, usually cold and often wet. My country is a tiny island. I miss her sometimes …”

Khan thought back a moment. "I-land. Water, around land. Yes?" He was fairly certain that was the correct meaning of the word, but wanted to check. "Malcolm travel lot. Not go home, to land?"

“Yes, an island is a relatively small bit of land completely surrounded by water,” Malcolm said. “I live in the United States now. Most of my traveling days are over. I’ve made a home for myself there, even though it’s not where I started from. Sometimes, you find your home is not where you come from, but somewhere you find something for yourself.” He began to dole out their food, making sure each man had plenty, since the day had been long and the next day promised to be the same. “That doesn’t mean I don’t miss the old girl, though.”

This did not make sense to Khan. If Malcolm missed his home land, why did he not go back? Why did he make America his new home? But he did not press for further questions on the subject. Instead he started to eat the serving of cold rations Malcolm had supplied.

Jim leaned into Khan and asked, “Do you wish to live with my family, Khan?” He picked up his own food and began to eat, grateful for something to fill his stomach. His insides were definitely starting to gnaw at themselves.


Jim grinned at the answer, but said, “I bet you’ll miss this home sometimes, too, the same as Malcolm.” He looked over at the Brit. “Where are you from, anyway?”

“London,” Malcolm said. “My grandfather and father were in the Royal Navy. They were mighty angry at me when I turned out to be a landlubber. Fortunately, my uncle’s sons both when into the navy and my sister’s eldest is about to go on his first voyage. I guess I did alright sticking to the regular army, wot?”

"Army is ... warrior, yes?" Khan asked, wanting to confirm his understanding of the word. Sometimes there were lots of things that Malcolm said that he did not quite understand. And he did not want to annoy the man by constantly asking questions, but there were some that he felt were important and in need of being clarified.

“An army is a group of land warriors,” Malcolm agreed. “And a navy is a group of warriors of the water, usually the oceans. Marines, too. Not that you need to understand the complexities of the British military ... or the American one.” He chewed into a piece of jerky with gusto.

Jim grinned and asked, “Did you have an army or navy, Khan? Some set of warriors to protect your people and lands?”
"Land warriors, yes. Army. Yes." Khan said, looking to Jim. His people did not travel the ocean as other cultures learned to do. Though they respected water, they had never navigated it. "No water warrior. Water sacred, to drink. And ocean powerful, good and bad spirits."

"I never was one much for the ocean," Malcolm confessed. "Those weeks on the ship were interminable. I prefer scouting people who would kill us if they could to being stuck in the middle of the water, which might any moment turn on us." He took a swig from the flask he always carried in his boot.

Khan nodded quietly, understanding and in agreement with Malcolm. The ocean had demons, evil forces within. Of course, not all of the ocean was bad, there was good too, like whales and fish. But he understood and respected the dangers of the ocean. But they had managed a safe voyage here, which they should be thankful for. And when this was all over, and headed back to Jim's home, they would have to be mindful and grateful to the ocean for another safe passage, if they succeeded.

"So, that’s why you didn’t follow family tradition," Jim said, cocking his head to look at Malcolm with an understanding gaze.

"Indeed," Malcolm said with a wry twist to his lips. "A few ocean voyages are all very well, but being on the water all of the time would not have served me. No doubt, I would have been flogged out of the service."

Yes, on the ocean there was no escape, unless you were a bird or a fish. And men were neither. Khan understood the feeling. Ocean voyages were still very new to him, but making a long-term habit of it did not appeal to him. "Malcolm, from a large family?" He asked, understanding some things about traditions and passing skills to the next generation.

"Just my sister and myself. Our pater was at sea much of the year, so mater did not want more than the two. And when pater was away, she made all of the money for the house," Malcolm said. "He got paid only on his return and a low wage it was, unless they had some bounty. She taught us all to be strong and frugal. She was not sad to when I chose not to go to sea. My sister and she live together now that pater’s gone, but there’s my sister’s children to keep mater happy."

Khan struggled at first to understand Malcolm. Though by the time he was done explaining things, he understood that 'pater' meant father and that 'mater' meant mother. "Jim brother has children also."

Khan said, making the connection between siblings and their children, though had forgotten the gender associated with niece or nephew to say it properly.

"Lovely to have the pressure taken off one," Malcolm said with a nod to Jim, who grinned back. "I know my parents wanted me to marry and settle down after I left the Army, but Captain Archer’s introduction to Christopher brought a new interest to my life. This archaeology has proven even more adventurous than I imagined." He smiled that little quirk of his lips that expressed his deep appreciation for their current situation.

"We didn’t really intend it to get this interesting," Jim confessed. "The Marcuses changed everything about the way we approached our work. Mom and Chris haven’t been able to be in the field for too long. I believe they’re happier about this eventuality than they show."

"Work will be better with Marcuses gone." Khan said, understanding this at the very least. He finished up his ration and cleaned up after himself, knowing that they would all need their rest before tomorrow.

"Your temple will be safe with them gone," Jim said with a hint of ferocity. "And all of the other places they might pillage. A little revenge for the ones they’ve already despoiled, too." He scowled
and looked away into the night, right hand clenched into a tight fist.

“All of those things,” Malcolm agreed. “As well as stopping them from killing or hurting more people.”

Jim looked a little chagrined at the reminder and said, “You’re right. That most of all.”

Even though the anger Jim was feeling would soon be addressed, right now Khan wanted to comfort his friend. Reaching out, Khan placed his hand over Jim's clenched fist, then worked two fingers under until Jim was forced to hold his hand. "Khan angry also. Tomorrow, relief from anger."

“Or the day after,” Malcolm said, ignoring the way the men held hands without even a flicker in his expression. “We have some planning to do, and I’d prefer not to take things too hasty now that we’re this close. I want to confer with the others and make sure our plan is strong before we move in. And that I propose we do dawn of the day after tomorrow.”

Jim swallowed hard and said, “That seems a long time from now to me at this moment. A lot of nerves to try and work through.” He lightly threaded his hand around Khan’s and rubbed his thumbs over the digits in thanks. “I know you’re right, though. You’re the expert in this.”

Khan kept his focus on Jim for the time being, simply sitting and holding his hand. They each had their reasons for getting into this, but Khan felt that Jim was perhaps carrying the most weight, the most pain, the most stress in seeing things resolved.

Jim blew out a long breath and stretched out his body a little. “I guess I’ll clean up and turn in. Are you ready, Khan?” He smiled over at his friend softly, gratitude in his expression for the support he gave to Jim so freely.

"Yes. We rest now." Khan agreed. Even though they had each agreed to take different watches during the night, Khan still intended to stay close to his friend for much of the night.

Malcolm nodded to them and said, “I shall hold down the fort, gentlemen. Get some rest. I’ll wake you, Jim, when it’s time for your watch.” He tossed off a salute, grinning when Jim echoed the move.

Jim cleaned up his area, stood and stretched to the sky with a low sigh of enjoyment. He nodded a further goodnight to Malcolm and headed back to the shelter he shared with Khan. Along the way, he said quietly to his companion, “I need to step into the trees for a moment. I’ll return shortly.”

Khan considered the meaning of this comment for a second, then smiled. "Yes, Jim." He said, releasing his hand to let Jim go about his private business. Meanwhile, he would get their blankets organized and laid out comfortably for the night.

Jim took a few moments after he completed his business to enjoy the now refreshing rain and look around him at the jungle. There was indeed the continuing sound of some birdsong and a few other animal cries in the growing dark. He smiled at the peaceful sensation of the evening, before turning back to the shelters for the night. He strolled back to the opening of the shelter he shared with Khan and drew one of the flaps to give them privacy and keep out most of the wind and damp. “Hello,” he said to Khan, almost shyly, even as he carefully removed his shirt and reached for his pants.

"Yes?" Khan sat up from where he had been laying out, his body heat warming the blankets. "Hello?" He asked, unsure why Jim was introducing himself again. "Good?"

Jim smiled and carefully folded his clothes and set them aside for later use. He climbed into the blankets next to Khan and reached out to cup his cheek with one hand. Scooting forward, he kissed
Khan on the lips with a tender touch. He did not linger long, but pulled back to smile at his friend. “Good. Very good. Thank you.”

"Good." Khan smiled, eyes bright. He was pleased that Jim had kissed him, and not because it was for a ceremony, and not because he was a lion or wolf. He was a man, and Jim was willing to show affection to him as a man. It made him happy. "Sleep now, Jim." Khan said, nuzzling his face against his friend to kiss his jaw in return, before settling in, arms wrapped around him comfortably.

“Yeah,” Jim said. “Malcolm will be waking me up soon enough for my watch.” He yawned and snuggled into his companion with a low hum of pleasure. “You sleep, too, Khan.” He made it a light order, nothing too serious. “Night, Noonien.”

"Yes. Jim and Khan sleep." Khan said quietly. "Good dreams." He said, wishing them upon his friend for the night. Tomorrow and the days after would be difficult enough, without bad dreams ripping at the mind during a time of rest.
Chapter 18

Malcolm kept his plan straightforward to increase the chances of success for a non-military group campaign. First, Khan encouraged the horses to run away, leading a large portion of the Marcus party to chase after them, including almost half of the hired mercenaries with their guns. Two of the Kirk group took up scouting positions to keep an eye for their return and be ready to warn their fellows.

Second, Khan, Spock and Chekov had taken off as soon as the horses stampeded, heading for the back entrance to the temple discovered by Khan in the scouting two days prior. They were to catch any of the Marcus group in the temple, defeat as many as possible, while driving out the rest, before taking position at the entrance to the temple and keeping out their foes, while picking off others as possible. The remaining Kirk party, led by Malcolm and Sulu, charged into the confused encampment to take care of the other mercenaries and drive off the non-armed members. Jim, Chris and Winona took up special position at the tents with the artifacts to make sure none more were taken.

At least, that was the way Malcolm sketched it out and certainly, the horse stampede worked like a charm. He signaled Khan, Spock and Chekov on their way, before gathering his ‘troops’ and heading into battle.

Still in the form of a wolf, as that was how Khan had spoken to the horses and convinced them to run off, Khan darted back to where he, Spock and Chekov were to secure the back entrance to the temple. Once there, Khan transformed back into a man, and dressed in the clothing he had made arrangements with Chekov to provide. With the horses and the men in pursuit causing a loud distraction, the three men were able to drop down into the back of the temple chamber. Here, they slowly pushed forward, wanting to ensure that no one was using the temple as a fortress in which they would fight from.

Inside the temple, Carol Marcus, one of the mercenaries, and three hired hands were doing a last check of some of the small chambers deep in the temple. These rooms did not contain nearly as much of interest as the main ones, but the Marcus pair were determined to lose nothing, especially since it seemed like the damned hand of James T. Kirk had again beaten them to the site in time to steal from under their noses the absolute best of the temple.

Carol felt especially bitter about this loss, since she took great pride in her skills at bringing men to their knees and keeping them there. But despite her certainty that she’d crushed Jim’s heart, he refused to be a good little boy and crawl away to cower in a hole for good. She took extra care then not to leave behind any artifact that might fetch a decent price.

As deep inside the temple as they were, she and her group were unaware of the disturbances outside.

With weapons already drawn, Spock took point, while Khan directed him which direction to take with a hushed voice and hand signals, with Chekov watching their backs. Quietly coming upon Carol Marcus, the three took position before making themselves known.

"Surrender your weapons." Spock said clearly, keeping the mercenary as his primary target.

"Not yours. Not welcome." Khan said, speaking to Carol, a low growl to his voice.

Carol made a ferocious noise of anger, recognizing Spock and Chekov instantly, but then cooled down with a slight smile. "Well, gentlemen, it seems you have me at a disadvantage,” she said
sweetly and tossed perfect blonde hair over her shoulder. “I wonder, though, what you’ll do when
the rest of my party, not to mention my father, comes looking for me. You’re not going to feel so
sure of yourselves then.” She casually tossed aside her gun, keeping a small blade tucked inside her
blouse, and fastened her eyes on Khan. “I don’t remember you, handsome. And I would definitely
remember you.”

"Not welcome here." Khan said again, though relied heavily on Spock and Chekov to do most of the
talking.

"Ve are not interested in prison-ears. Ve vant you gone." Chekov said, searching the hired help for
weapons while Khan covered him. But the hired men were the labour force, meant to carry the
packaged artifacts out of the jungle, or bring in supplies, they were not the brute force of the
mercenaries.

"You are Carol Marcuses," Khan said, accustomed to the name being spoken to him in the plural.
"Not welcome here. You must leave now."

“Gone?” Carol asked. “How very rude you are, young man.” She turned her limpid eyes back to
Khan. “You seem more the gentleman. And as you seem to know my name, I should like very
much to know yours.” She stepped closer to Khan, looking up at him and allowing her face to go
soft and dreamy. “I would like to know you much better, indeed.”

Initially startled by the attempt Carol was making to become familiar, Khan stared at her, somewhat
bewildered. Did she not understand? She was to go. "Name is Khan." He said, not seeing any harm
in giving his name. "Where is Carol, father?" He asked.

“Khan,” Carol purred and put a hand on his chest. “What are you doing with this pathetic crowd?”
She glanced at Spock, refusing to be worried by the guns he and his teenager accomplice carried.
“My father and I are a much classier group than any these people work with ... the Kirks.” She
sneered at the very thought of them. “We chased them out of the business they loved.”

Khan, who barely endured handshakes, did not like Carol touching him without permission. "Carol
Marcuses," he said, speaking to her as if she were a child. "Do not touch. Not yours," he said, taking
her hand off his chest. "This temple. Do not touch. Not yours."

“The temple is ours by right of having claimed it first,” Carol said, stepping back gracefully and
dropping her hand to her side. She didn’t like being shooed away. “And we’re keeping everything
we found here, until we sell it off of course.”

Khan growled outright. "Temple is mine. Do not touch."

"Steady, Khan," Spock said calmly. "You do not need to prove anything to her."

“Yours?” Carol asked and stepped closer again to look over this strange man. “How can it possibly
be yours? It’s been standing here over a thousand years and the descendants of the ones who built it
are long since vanished in time. By what right would you try to claim it?”

This time Spock did the talking. "That is none of your concern, Carol" Spock forced the mercenary
to give up ground, making him back up to head out the only real entrance to the room. He was not
about to supply Carol Marcus with free information, and speaking the way he did would encourage
the others to do the same, though he was unsure if Khan understood that or not.

"Leave temple in peace. Will not be harmed," Khan said to the hired help, understanding that their
allegiance to this was bought and sold.
"I didn’t give you permission to call me Carol, half-breed,” she snapped back at him viciously. “And Mr. Khan can speak for himself, I’m sure.” She looked back to the handsome man just in front of her. “I promise you, my father and I can make being on our side very profitable indeed.” Her inflection promised more than just monetary fulfillment. “I can see you are very much a man, not like that one-" she jerked her head toward Spock “-or his pitiful friend, Jim Kirk.”

Half-breed? Khan glanced to Spock with a small frown. He did not understand why Carol had called him that, nor why that was a bad thing. Truly, Carol was an unkind woman. And in a way, this stumped Khan. He fought when he needed to fight, but had lived such a long and mostly peaceful life, that being cruel did not come naturally to him. And though it did briefly occur to Khan that he could pretend he was interested in her deal, the truth was he had no practice at deception. And Carol Marcus clearly did. "Jim Kirk is a friend. Spock is a friend. Chekov is a friend," Khan said, as the bones of one of his people tossed into a wooden box caught his eye. "Carol Marcuses. No respect for people." He said, reaching into the box to gently adjust the skull so that the jaw was aligned, at the very least.

Carol watched him put the skull back into place and walked over to the makeshift coffin, which would carry the bones far away from the temple to a place where they would be auctioned to all interested parties. “I have respect for people who deserve it,” she said. “You would be one of those men. They are not. They have no vision. No understanding of what can be gained by all that we have found here.” She lightly touched the skull in the wooden box. “I respect the wealth these bones represent.”

"Do not touch. Not yours." Khan growled again, his body going cold and rigid. "Gain respect for loyal dead. Gain respect-"

"Khan, easy," Spock said again, glancing to Khan, concerned that Carol would continue to draw him into debate, or worse, push him to the point where he transformed, maybe even attack. "It will all be put back, as it was, Khan."

“The Hell it will!” Carol said, grabbed the skull, flung it between Spock and Chekov so that it would shatter on the wall if nobody stopped its flight, turned gracefully on one foot and rushed for the entrance to the temple, yelling, “Father! Father!” The rest of her group retreated at her heels in an uncertain jumble.

The moment that Carol pulled back her arm and it was clear that she was about to throw the skull, Khan rushed and reached out to catch it. Afraid and furious all at once. This was his friend. He cradled the skull in his arms, shaken and whispering heartfelt apologies to the remains of what had once been his friend.

Spock took out the mercenary with one shot to the hip, but did not pursue Carol or the others. "Khan! We still need you," he said, glancing to see Chekov at his back.

Putting the skull carefully back in the box, Khan trembled with rage, even as he spoke another prayer. He vowed to give his friend peace and show him the care he deserved. With the promise made, Khan once more began focused to the goals of the group. "We go. We stop Marcuses."

Carol Marcus raced out of the temple and into a madhouse. There were people running in every direction, shots being fired and confused yells. Instincts honed, she sought refuge at the base of the temple entrance, behind some of the fallen rocks blown from the walls during their successful attempt to gain larger entry. In a moment, she saw that the majority of the running men were from those hired to act as their diggers and bearers during the excavation, including those who had joined her in the flight from the temple itself. They were obviously making for the jungle, seeking to escape the violence that had come so unexpected.
Through the din, she made out her father and a group of their remaining mercenaries attempting to storm the tents where their precious artifacts were stored, ready to be shipped to England for sale. And though the tide had turned against them, she knew her father would never leave without some of the richest spoils in his pockets or without tearing apart those who dared to attack them, as she saw now among the line of people firing from the tents both Kirks and their faithful dog, Pike. With a snarl befitting an enraged bearcat, she raced into the melee, seized a rifle from one of the fallen mercenaries and lined up a shot herself ... at Jim Kirk.

Spock and Chekov continued to clear each room in the temple, working their way forward to the entrance. Though Khan was still distracted and upset by the destruction of property, he kept close to the other two men, working together to secure the area. They forced several more laborers to make a run for it, having no wish to take lives when it was not necessary.

It only took a few minutes to secure the temple, but was still enough time for Carol to get a weapon on Jim, which Khan picked up on as she took a shot. This time however there was no amount of calm words from Spock or Chekov that would keep Khan in his place. The man ran from the temple entrance and transformed mid-stride, not bothering to take off his clothes, but instead ripped through them as he became a massive lion, pouncing onto her back and crushing her into the ground with a massive roar of rage.

The appearance of the gigantic lion, coupled with the agonized scream of Carol Marcus, finished the fight for most of the remaining members of the Marcus expedition. With cries of fear, they raced for their lives away from the campsite, tearing into the nearby jungle and hills with little regard for anything but escape. Only a few of the loyalest and longest term members of the group stood their ground, alongside the only one not reacting with fear ... Alexander Marcus.

He turned in Carol’s direction the instant her scream rended the air, additional fury in his already nearly insane eyes. “Carol!” he cried, voice carrying over the remaining shots and yells. And without hesitation, he aimed his gun at the golden lion and fired three quick shots at his head.

Holding the entrance to the temple, Spock and Chekov offered suppression fire to those who still held positions within the camp. But Khan had acted as a wild card, and right now, they could not help him, without abandoning the strategic protection they were providing to the others.

Feeling the bullets sting, as one cut across his ear and another caught up in his thick mane, hitting his shoulder, Khan roared again in anger. His voice carried through the jungle, the ground literally trembling as if it were an earthquake. The massive lion lurched himself forward, running at full speed to tackle Marcus head-on.

Both sides could only watch in growing awe and horror as Alexander Marcus held his ground and emptied his gun at the lion now charging him down. And most eyes averted at the inevitable collision of enraged feline and man. Excluding Jim, who had been helped to his feet by his mother, and now, clutching a bleeding shoulder, began his own footrace toward cat and man, unable to stand by and do nothing while his friend put himself into so much danger on his behalf. He didn’t notice anything else around him, eyes fixed on the confrontation ahead.

Channelling the lion goddess Nakhmet, delivering swift justice to a thousand wrongs, Khan tackled Marcus from the front, claws digging into his chest, until the man was brought down. And without hesitation the lion opened his massive jaws and crushed the man’s skull with his teeth, killing him almost instantly.

Jim vaguely heard Carol’s piercing shriek above his heart pounding in his ears, unaware that he’d also cried out in horror at the sight. But he did not slow, rushing to the side of the lion and saying, “Noonien! It’s alright, Noonien. It’s alright now. You stopped them. The Marcuses can’t hurt you.
or your people’s things anymore.” He kept his eyes off the corpse, even as he fearlessly placed a hand on the lion’s back. “Everything’s safe now.”

Lips and chin lightly dripping with blood, the lion panted as he stood his ground now. The adrenaline that had given strength to every muscle was hard to quiet, but he remained still now, trying hard to focus on Jim and weather he was safe or not.

Jim gently pushed at Khan, urging him away from the bloody body of what once had been Alexander Marcus. That was more than Jim had wanted to end the man’s evil, but possibly not less than he deserved in the end. After all, the justice had been meted out by a demi-God. His glance fell on Carol, where she lay in a twist of limbs, one leg obviously shattered and other bones very probably broken. Her eyes were locked on her father’s remains, face a rictus of shocked terror and pain. And for her, he felt a sudden pity.

“Please, Noonien, let’s move away from here and let’s get you calmed down. We need to make sure everyone’s alright and take care of the wounded. The fight’s over. We won.”

Yes. Khan listened to Jim and followed his instruction. It was over. There was no threat to Jim now. No threat to their friends. The temple and the artifacts were now under their control. It was done. Khan kept close to Jim as they retreated back to one of the tents. It did not occur to him that he had gone too far, or that the others would be fearful of him now. It did not occur to Khan that the others would treat him differently, or that Jim might think differently of him now. Those were not things that concerned his mind. Not when his mind was more lion then man, right now.

The others were a little wary, but as Jim and Khan ambled toward the tents, Malcolm led the way over to the Marcuses, covering Alexander’s body with a blanket and getting help for Carol. He knew the horrors of war, better than the rest, so he understood what Khan had been driven to. As he moved, everyone else sprang into action, some going to join the scouts to ensure the rest of Marcus’ party did not return, others checking over their own wounded, of whom there were thankfully few.

Tucker had taken a shot to the knee, and Sulu to the right hand, while both Scotty and Jim had shoulder wounds. But none of the party were killed and all would recover, a fortunate event, given the violence that had swirled around them.

For his part, Jim sat down in the middle of the main tent of artifacts and lightly stroked Khan’s side. His shoulder ached and still bled sluggishly, but his job for now was soothing his friend and resting his injured body. “Noonien. My beautiful lion.” He gave the animal a hug, ignoring the bloodstains on his coat.

Khan called out to Jim in a soft roar, a sound that was both seeking and giving reassurance. He closed his eyes and stood still for a time, leaning into the hug. It took some time, but eventually the sound of the people outside began to filter into Khan’s ears, and as soon as he could start to hear people, he could hear the birds and other jungle sounds as well. With Jim there to ground him, Khan began to calm down.

Jim just held on as best he could and stroked he soft fur with his good hand, not wanting anything (like a wince of pain by himself) to disturb his friend. And he smiled at the sound of the roar, understanding the tone in the way humans have always understood their animal friends.

A shadow appeared at the tent and a soft voice asked, “May I come in and take a look at Jim’s shoulder? I know he got shot during the fight.” Uhura, who had learned medicine both before her freedom from the local healer and from Dr. McCoy.

The lion chuffed in greeting to Uhura, acknowledging her and the care Jim needed. Pulling his head back, Khan kept his eyes on Jim, ears forward as he listened and watched for any sign of distress
Uhura smiled at the friendly sound, understanding herself to be accepted by Khan. “Thank you,” she said formally in his language and bowed to the lion. With a little clucking of her tongue in sympathy, she knelt by Jim and carefully peeled away the fabric from his shoulder, having to cut some of it. “The bullet’s still inside,” she said softly. “Let me give you something for the pain.

“Thank you, Nyota,” Jim said, using her given name in a way he rarely did. “Noonien, will you come sit on my good side, so I can lean on you?”

Getting up on all fours, the lion walked around Jim until he was at his good side, facing the right way. He sat down on his back legs, settling his weight so that Jim could lean into him. His ears flicked back and forward a few times, picking up sounds from outside, but clearly found no threat in them. Though Marcus had gotten off many shots, the one that had clipped his ear was barely bleeding, and the one in his shoulder was not very deep and had already worked itself out, lost somewhere on the ground outside.

“Are you alright, Noonien?” Jim asked, remembering the way Marcus shot at him. He stroked through the thick fur. “Will you let me look you over and Uhura treat you when she’s done with me? I saw how Marcus tried to hurt you. And your poor ear.” He looked up at the rip in fur and flesh, before pushing his face into the soft fur.

Khan purred softly to show he was consenting to the suggestion to be looked over, after Jim. He would have normally nuzzled and licked at Jim’s face at this point, but was aware of the blood over his face, and did not want to transfer it onto his friend. Khan could barely stand the taste of it on his lips as it was, but could not do anything about it at this time. Except perhaps, transform back into a man to wash, but he was not yet prepared to do that.

Uhura handed Jim a brew to take the edge off the pain, which he drank with a grimace. “Are you ready for me to remove the bullet?” she asked after a moment to let it begin to take effect.

Jim leaned even more into Khan and nodded. “As ready as I’ll ever be. I’ll try to keep still for you.”

Uhura lifted a thin, long knife for digging out the bullet. “Please try not to move, Jim. Khan, I would be grateful if you help him keep still. This will be delicate work.” She gently and carefully inserted the knife into the hole, searching for the bullet.

Khan kept very still so that Jim could press into him, as solid as a brick wall, and yet warmer and softer. The lion folded his ears back a few times, not liking the smell of blood from his friend, but knew it was necessary. And though he was far from happy right now, he made soft, soothing noises as a means to keep them both calm.

Jim made a low, pained noise as the knife dug into the soft flesh of his shoulder, working around the lodged bullet. He turned his head and pressed it into his friend, fighting not to pull away from the pain. Even the brew only worked so well, though without it, Jim never could have stood the probe. He felt the bullet begin to loosen inside him and inch out under the careful touch of Uhura’s maneuvering.

“Not much longer now,” Uhura soothed them both, grateful that Jim had the lion to lean into for support. “Thank you for helping us, Khan,” she added, not looking up at the great cat, but smiling for him anyway.

Using the top of his head, which was clean, Khan rubbed against Jim, not wanting him to be in pain.
Though he felt it would soon be over. He was sorry that Jim had been shot, as he probably should have restrained Carol in the temple, but she had been so confusing to him at first, he had not been as forceful in the beginning as he perhaps should have been. And Jim had been shot because of that. He was sorry for that.

The gentle brush of fur over his head made Jim smile through the pain. For a powerful creature who had killed one person and crippled another, Khan showed his care for his friends in the gentlest of ways. And as Uhura succeeded in digging the bullet out, causing Jim to grunt with pain, he was glad for that affection, for the sturdy body giving him support.

“There. Now, I can bandage you,” Uhura said. “Just a few more minutes of work here.” She retrieved some fresh bandages from her satchel and began to carefully wrap them around the wound.

Khan watched intently as Uhura continued to give Jim careful care to his injuries. As Jim was bandaged up so that the weight was taken off his injured arm while it recovered, Khan chuffed softly, approving of the care and pleased that she did not have to go digging around in Jim's arm any more.

“Thank you, Nyota,” Jim said and gave her a kiss on the cheek. “May we attend to Khan now?” He looked at the great lion with fond worry. “I’m not sure where Marcus shot him.”

“Of course,” Uhura said and handed Jim a clean cloth she had just dampened with some water. “Will you clean him up first, so I can see where the wounds are, please?”

Jim turned to the lion, cloth in his good hand. “May I please clean your fur and face, Noonien?” he asked. “I need to see where you might have been hit.”

Khan blinked slowly and offered the muzzle of his face for Jim to clean. He would be grateful for the blood to be washed off his face and lips. Tail lightly twitching back and forth on the floor, Khan otherwise sat patiently, letting his friends look after him.

Jim slowly began to wipe the gore from off Khan’s face, not thinking about where it came from quite consciously. He moved up the muzzle and cleared flecks from his cheeks and nose. “Will you lower your head a little? I want to get your ear and mane.”

Lowering his front legs, Khan sat down on all fours now, so that he would be lower to the ground. Even so, he turned his head down to make it easier on Jim to help clean his face. Lightly closing his eyes, the wet cloth against his fur felt like another large cat giving him a bath, which was a calming thought.

Jim ruffled Khan’s fur with his good hand and said, “Thank you, Noonien,” before he examined the wounded ear, cleaning around it carefully. “I’m going to work on your ear now,” he said, changing to a clean piece of cloth. “I’ll be gentle, but this may hurt.” His tongue slid out of his mouth unbidden as he tenderly washed the jagged rip in Khan’s ear, flinching at the sight. “My poor Noonien.”

Khan flinched his ear a few times, but never growled at his friend. He sighed and remained still while Jim cleaned the small wound to his ear. He did not know all the benefits to modern medicine, but was certain it would heal.

Jim pressed a kiss to Khan’s mane and murmured, “Such a strong lion.” He continued to work on his mane and frowned when he reached another bloody patch near his left cheek. Gently cleaning the area, he frowned when a bit more blood dirtied it a second after it was clean. “You have a wound hidden in your mane, Noonien. May I search for it?”
Turning his head to the side, the lion stretched out one side of his neck. Though it was hard to see through the thick mane that acted somewhat as body armor, at least against other animals. He vocalized a few friendly growls, letting Jim look and attend to his injury.

Jim set aside the cloth for a moment and combed through the thick hair with one hand, fingers tender and careful. After a moment, he let out a hiss. “Oh. You’ve got a bullet lodged in the skin here.”

He looked over at Uhura and then back at Khan. “Will you trust Uhura to remove it, if I keep your hair out of the way?”

"Mrrhn-" Khan groaned softly and laid down even further now, resting on his good side, head still stretched out. It would be better then trying to keep his head up while Uhura performed the necessary surgery. With a few more flicks of his tail, Khan looked to Jim, rubbing his cheek against his friend’s leg.

“Thank you,” Jim said again and scooted over, keeping the wound exposed, so Uhura could maneuver to remove the small bullet. He wished he could pet Khan to keep him calm, but his other arm was in a sling. “Just let us know if it hurts too much.”

Uhura did not have the same restriction on her arms and did indulge in a moment of petting Khan, before lifting another long, thin knife to use to remove this bullet. “Are you ready, my friend?” she asked softly, looking Khan in one of his cat eyes.

Khan met her gaze with trust. He took a few breaths, then sighed deeply, letting himself surrender into the comfort of his friend, and the care of another. He closed his eyes and gave a few small licks to Jim’s shirt, taking on the scent his clothes carried, rather then the taste of the fabric itself.

Jim smiled at the licking and said, “She’s really good. It will only be a moment before that pesky bullet is gone.”

Straightening her shoulders, Uhura leaned in and began to probe for the bullet, which was fortunately not too deep inside Khan’s cheek. The mane had slowed the force enough to cause only a relatively shallow wound. Still, she had to work the sharp tip of her blade around the bullet to give it room to ease out again. After a few moments of pure concentration, she said with quiet triumphant, “I have it. Now, I’ll just clean the wound. Do you want a small bandage, Khan?”

The lion groaned with discomfort a few times, but remained still for Uhura. Once the bullet was removed Khan breathed deep again. He lifted his head and gave Jim a few licks on his good arm, then also gave Uhura a few licks on her hand. Though his tongue was rough, it was meant as a kind and thankful gesture.

Uhura laughed in her musical fashion and said, “I’ll take that as a yes.” She considered her supplies and fashioned something to stay over the small wound, after it was cleaned. “This cleaning will sting,” she warned the lion, but taking her cue from Jim, she fearlessly applied the liquid to the small hole.

The lion flipped his tail a few times in annoyance. Not because of Uhura or Jim, but as a natural reaction to the discomfort. Still, he endured it without a growl or showing his claws. He had not noticed the injury before, but now that it was taken care of, he did feel better.

Jim noted the tail flopping and leaned down to rub his cheek in Khan’s mane, above the wound, trying to soothe. “Almost done, Noonien,” he said. “I think we’ve only got your shoulder left.”

Uhura placed the bandage and said, “You can move your hand, Jim.” She checked as he pulled away to make sure the hair did not interfere with the covering and nodded. “There. I hope that feels
better.”

It did feel better, though not enough for the lion to purr. But he did vocalize softly and nuzzle his head against Jim with affection. Sitting up, Khan looked to Jim, then to Uhura, wanting to thank them, but was not yet ready to change back.

“Shoulder,” Jim said softly and leaned closer to examine it. “The bullet is gone, and the wound isn’t bleeding much.” he picked up his cloth and used a clean corner to carefully wipe away blood and dirt. “May I clean your wound?” he asked Khan, lifting his head to return the nuzzle.

This time Khan purred back, pleased by the return of affection. Though he could not see the wound on his own shoulder, that one he had felt, and so kept still while Jim attended to it, cleaning it out just in case there was any remaining residue from the gunshot.

Jim made a noise of satisfaction when the wound was cleaned and sat back to allow Uhura to expertly bind it. “Thank you again, Nyota,” he said with honest gratitude.

“There is no need for thanks, Jim,” Uhura said. “It was a pleasure to help you stop the Marcuses and as a friend, I wish to care for your wounds. I suggest you both get some rest. We shall attend to matters for a few hours. You remain here-” she gestured to the tent full of artifacts “-and remember that we have done much good here today.”

Khan pulled his head up and nuzzled it against her hand and side, purring loudly to express his thanks as well. It had been a stressful time for all of them, but with all of Jim's friends working together, it had made things much easier on everyone.

Uhura leaned into the large feline, laughing a little in delight at the soft touch and purring. “I will take that as agreement. Get some rest. I shall have Malcolm or Spock bring you some bedding in a little while.” She elegantly stood and made her way out.

Jim turned to Khan and asked, “Feeling better?” He reached out the caress the soft fur. “You look better, all clean now.”

The lion turned his large head to the side, until he completely rolled to his side so that he could look at Jim upside-down. He purred and licked at Jim, very happy that his friend was alright and that there was no longer a threat to the temple, or his friends, both living and dead.

Jim beamed at his friend and flopped on top of him and hugged him tightly. He rubbed his face into the warm belly and made his own contented sound, aware of how ridiculous he must seem, but not caring. “You are a good boy. Such a good Noonien. A happy boy?”

Khan continued to purr deeply, pleased that Jim was not expressing any signs of stress or being upset. Whether today unfolded how anyone predicted, or not, it was over. At least for the Marcuses. Now Khan and the others could put the temple back in order and see that the site was protected in the future.

Jim did feel a strange mixture of emotions over the death of Alexander Marcus and the injury of Carol, but overall, he felt mostly relief that they had triumphed and nobody on their side had died. Tomorrow, he would check in on Carol and help bury her father, but for now, he needed to just express his contentedness with this being over. And enjoy the closeness of his friend and lover ... even in lion form.
The crates of human and animal skeletons were returned to the temple at Khan's request. The people, his friends, were to stay here, and so were some of the animals. But first Khan had to identify each of them, which took time to do, since many of them were not laid out in their boxes the way they had been in the tomb. Nor did any of them retain the gifts of jewelry they once had been given in death.

After a few hours, as Khan began to recognize who went where, he stepped outside for a breath of fresh air and to find Jim. As the rest of the party attended to the remainder of the artifacts and the surrounding jungle, removing and undoing the damage the Marcuses had caused.

Jim noted Khan emerge from the temple and slowly made his way over to him. He wished he could help Khan with his task, but appreciated that his friend wanted to do right by his people for himself. The rest of them were organizing the rest of the artifacts, so Khan could decide how to handle them once the remains of his people and animals had been returned to their normal places. He had also assisted in burying Alexander Marcus and the others of his party killed in the attack. Malcolm and his mother were busy working on a plan to hide the temple from other humans and keep its secrets protected.

"Hello, Noonien," he said softly. "Are you alright?" He spoke in Khan's tongue as a gesture of respect and concern.

"Yes." Khan said with a gentle smile, reaching out to pet his hand down the length of Jim's arm, as a desire to be close to him. "Soon, will lay out people, to rest again." He said in English, taking a deep breath, then looking to the jungle. "Jim, help Khan? Others, help Khan? Find flowers and pretty leaves, from the jungle? We collect, bring back. Make beds for people. Sleep, comfortable. Please?"

"Of course we will, Noonien," Jim assured and caught his hand, squeezing gently. "Do you want everyone who’s uninjured to come? We’ll have to leave Uhura to watch over the injured. You’ll have to teach us which kinds of flowers and leaves to collect. We don’t want to make any mistakes or choose any plants that are inappropriate." He reached out to stroke Khan’s hair, trying to soothe him.

"Yes, please." Khan said and moved a little closer to his friend. "Only those willing. If heart does not desire to collect plants, then they must stay behind." Khan said, only wanting those who wanted to be a part of the processes, and not because they had to. "Understand?" Khan asked, sometimes speaking in his own language if he felt Jim would comprehend enough of what he said.

Jim smiled at Khan and said, "Noonien, these people all chose to be here of their own free will. Tell them what you want and why, and even the wounded will be trying to get up to help you. Their hearts are with you because you are their friend." He pressed their foreheads together a moment. "Come, tell them how they may help you and your friends?"

"Thank you, Jim." Khan said and nuzzled their noses together a moment. Then heading over to where Spock and Sulu were double checking each other's work as a way to prevent anything from going missing, Khan began to address the group also working in the same area. "Hello, friends." He said at first to get their attention, "My people, ready to sleep again. First, they need beds, from the forest. Beds made from flowers and plants. Please help? If your heart says, good to help?"

People turned at the approach of Khan, curious as to what he might be there to say, since he had been sequestered in the temple all day. He also wore a serious expression, part pleading and part mourning. As he spoke, their expressions all softened with understanding and heads began to nod.
“We would be honored,” Winona said fiercely and stepped forward to look up at Khan. “We want to make sure that your temple is the way it should be again.”

“Of course, old man,” Malcolm agreed. “We’ll help in any way we can ... even gathering greenery.”

There was consensus among all of the able bodied group that they were willing and eager to help.

The strain that Khan had been feeling eased as he saw the willingness of those present to help him further. "Thank you, friends." He said with a slow, mindful nod of respect. "All flowers, are good. White flower ... jasmine ... best." He said, remembering the English name that Uhura had taught him for one of the native flowers. "Long leaves, soft grass, good also. Trust your eye." He said, then attempted to explain. "Eye says, this is pretty, this is good, trust eye. Gather for bed."

“We should go as a group and stay in view of each other.” Jim said. “We don’t want to lose track of anyone in the jungle. We need at least one person to stay with the wounded and another to act as lookout, just in case anybody from the Marcus party decides to start anymore trouble.” There had been a brief skirmish in the morning hours with some of the mercenaries who’d returned in a midnight raid, attempting to take some of the artifacts they knew to be stored in the large tents. They were beaten off, but the group remained wary. “That also means we can’t go out of the range of easy help. Still, we should be able to gather enough plants and flowers to give Khan’s people a respectful reinterment.”

A few members of the party agreed to stay behind, including Chekov who was uninjured, but agreed he would raise the alarm if there was trouble. And though Sulu had a hand injury, he argued his other hand was quite capable of doing the job, and so joined the group as they each took empty feed bags and headed for the jungle. They agreed to collect items in the jungle in such a way that left at least one other person in their direct line of sight, so that no one was truly alone.

Jim stuck close to Khan, thinking his friend might be feeling a bit unsettled by having to determine how best to take care of the remains of his people, which had been desecrated by the Marcus party. “Shall we gather the plants together?” he asked. “You can show me which ones are the best ... although I will use my eyes and heart, too.”

"Yes, Jim. Thank you." Khan said as they headed out to explore a small patch of the surrounding jungle. And though they were out of the direct sunlight from the artificial clearing made by the Marcuses to build their tents and crate goods, the ground and air of the jungle was still warm, giving life to all plant and animal species. Here Khan picked out a few large ferns, and other ground cover, but never taking too much from one source.

Jim observed how he went about his foraging, aware of other curious eyes from around them. He looked over the foliage and began to select some heart-shaped leaves, thinking they were appropriate for the occasion. In a few moments, he was immersed in the greenery, arms full of assorted flowers and leaves and waving blades of grass. “I think we’re ready to start taking some of this in the temple ... if you’ll allow,” Jim said. He nodded toward the others, also carrying arms full of plant parts.

"Yes, this is good." Khan said as he paused in his work. "We can go back." He said, taking a few more flowers from the branches before he stopped as well. With feed bags and arms full of jungle flora, Khan smiled at each individual in turn. "Thank you, these are good gifts. Will make a good bed."

“Do we have enough?” Uhura asked, looking over the whole group and their gatherings. “We are happy to collect additional, if you need them.” There was general nodding throughout the small party, with Winona looking particularly fascinated by the entire event. “We are honored to assist you in this, Noonien. More than honored, for me. I understand the pain of having one’s ancestors treated
with disrespect and cruelty.” She lifted her chin defiantly to the sky. “We will do whatever is necessary to make sure yours are given their due.”

"Thank you, friends." Khan said, "What you gathered will do. Please come." He encouraged, those who remained willing. Going in the temple entrance, Khan lead the group down the long corridor that at least still had the stone carvings of animals that were rushing forward to the center. In what had once been his tomb, the crates that carried his people were resting near to where Khan intended to lay them out. But first their beds must be made.

"In past, the village work together, to do this. You friends, now my village." He said, trying to explain that this was a communal project, and not done by just one person anyway. "Nine friends. Sleep here." He said, drawing out long ovals in the sand. Three on the left and three on the right of the stone centerpiece where he had once laid out, and three at his feet. "We make their beds. Friends have a long sleep."

Jim felt a deep pleasure that all of his friends were considered part of Khan’s village and hoped the rest felt the same way. Certainly, they went about putting together the beds for the remains of Khan’s people with a quiet reverence, looking to Khan frequently for approval of their designs. For himself, he went to where he’d found Khan, remembering the way his closest people had been laid out and tried to replicate his memory of their surroundings. “Am I doing this correctly, Noonien?” he asked his friend.

"Yes, this is good." Khan said, his voice pleasant and relaxed, even though he did not smile for the time being. Some of the beds had more greens to them, others were more colourful with red and orange flowers, and others with white and greens mixed in. Each bed ended up being unique, as were the people who would be laying upon them. With all the helpers, there was enough to make each bed thick and long enough for each skeleton.

"Jim, help?" He asked as he began to reach into one of the boxes and began to pull out the head and torso of one of his long dead friends. Bound in fabric it was manageable to move without falling apart, but still Khan wished to have assistance, so that the body was not jostled and severed any more then it had already been at the hands of the Marcuses.

“Oh. Yes, I would be honored,” Jim said and moved to ever so carefully assist Khan in placing the remains of his friend back in their rightful place. He forced his hands to be still, even though he jangled with nerves, not wanting to do anything that might further damage or demean the remains. He let out a low sigh when they were placed into the new bed and looked to Khan for reassurance. “Yes?”

"Yes." Khan said gently, giving Jim a little smile, before attending to the skeleton. He made sure that the legs were together, arms at its sides, but bent slightly at the elbow, then positioned the head so that it was slightly tilted to the side. "Good." He said, then began to speak a prayer to his friend, while touching his left hand to his own forehead, lips, chest, only to repeat the gesture until he was done with his prayer.

Everyone stepped a few feet away to give Khan some space to complete his rituals, not wanting to disturb what was obviously a very important (and rather private feeling) moment. They carefully made sure each of the beds was completed, before Uhura asked in a soft tone, “Brother, may I help you with your family? ” after Khan had completed his prayers over the first.

Khan lifted his head and stared at Uhura, his eyes holding a powerful mixture of sadness and joy. "Brother?" He smiled at her, "Thank you." And reached a hand out to her, "Sister. Will you help me with another ?” He asked, not wanting to push how willing the others were to help, but grateful for those who even simply stood watch.
Jim smiled at the exchange and quietly explained to the others what Uhura had said. He also indicated that Khan might appreciate their willingness to help him with the remains, if done respectfully (that earned him a look from his mother). But soon, the others were quietly talking about who might best help and taking places by each of the beds to signal their desire to assist with this important task.

Uhura bowed her head gracefully in thanks and glided forward to take her place with Khan. “I am honored, my brother, to help you. Please guide me so I may show proper honor.”

"This woman was a mother-mother ... grandmother-" He said, using the English term he had learned from Uhura. "We lay her out, one hand on her hip, one on her chest. A sign, she has had many children, and carries in her heart, the love for children that are not her own." He said, explaining how she was to be positioned.

Uhura looked at the fragile remains with a lump in her throat and said, “I am sure she was beautiful, if she raised you.” With very careful hands, she handled the remains with Khan and helped put them back in their proper position. “May she never be disturbed again.”

"Yes, that is what we say. With our mind. Out lips. And our heart." Khan said, encouraging and willing to explain as he showed her the gesture that he had made while praying for the first. Touching his forehead, his lips, then chest. "I pray, that she is not disturbed again. That she knows peace. That she is with her family and that she is happy. I thank her for her love and kindness."

“You remember her?” Uhura asked, thinking of how many years ago she must have lived and raised Khan. She looked at him with brown eyes full of tears. “May I embrace you, brother?”

"Yes, I remember all of my friends." Khan said and moved forward with a nod, "We may both embrace." Khan said, reaching out to hug her. "Thank you, my sister. But do not be sad. She had a long and happy life."

Uhura gave him a firm hug and said, “I am both happy and sad, brother. You were alone for so long. And now you are not. Your ways were injured and now, we are fixing them. I long for a day when my people may, too, be freed, as you are now.” She smiled up at him. “Thank you for allowing me to assist you with this. My heart is gladdened.”

Khan nodded, making strong eye contact as he acknowledged her. "My heart is glad, also." He said with a soft purr to his voice. He looked around the room and nodded, "I was alone, but also, not alone. And now I leave my friends in peace, until we meet again."

Jim said, “Everyone would like to help you with your family, but we’ve talked and these are the people who would most desire to assist.” He gestured to where a single person stood quietly and hopefully by one of the newly made beds ... the four that remained. “May they help you, Noonien?”

"Yes, thank you." Khan said and turned his attention to the next, which was Spock standing beside one of the beds ready to be used. The two men lifted the next body out of the crate and laid it out on the bed of flowers. "This man, watch over sheep and goats. He lay, with head turned to the side, always watching for danger." He explained as Spock helped him lay out the body.

Jim watched with a quietly satisfied feeling as each of Khan’s old friends were placed with due reverence into their new beds. He hoped they could find a way to make sure the place remained undisturbed forever, leaving the people as they were meant to be. At the end everyone was gathered at the entrance to the room, watching Khan and waiting for some kind of sign of what to do next. After a moment, Jim stepped forward again. “Noonien? Shall we put back the other artifacts?”
"Give the goat back to my friend-" He said indicating to the one Spock had helped him lay to rest. "Baby goat, lays in his arms." He explained, trying to clarify that he did not mean that Spock, or any of them took the goat, but that it should be in one of the storage boxes, somewhere. "The rest, my gift to Kirk family, and friends." He said, speaking in English so that everyone understood his desires.

There was some general confusion as people searched for a baby goat skeleton, until Jim said with dismay, “They may not have thought it had any value and discarded the bones.” Outrage followed that statement.

“Well, where might they have placed bones they didn’t want?” Winona asked. “Did anyone see a refuse pile?”

Malcolm nodded and said, “In a small room, near the entrance, I believe. Shall we go see if we can find your friend’s lost goat?” He spoke without any irony, a trace of upset in his normally unflappable tone at the treatment of Khan’s temple.

“Thank you.” Khan said, deeply touched that the group was showing so much care in this matter. Turning back to look over his nine friends in their final resting place, Khan was worried about leaving them again. However, there was a sort of magic in the fact that Khan's new friends, his new village, had helped put everyone to rest, and he believed that sort of magic might protect them this time.

Most of the group trooped off, determined to locate the missing goat, but Jim hung behind, watching Khan with concern. "Could we ask the Gods to look after them? ” he asked, echoing Khan’s worry that they may not remain undisturbed. “And do you truly wish us not to leave some of your things? We do not need to take them…” He was deeply touched at the offer to allow the party to keep the artifacts, but also a bit reluctant now.

Glancing down, Khan sought out Jim's hand to hold. "The gifts, the treasures-" He said, not having an exact word for this in his language. "-were meant for me. My friends here, were gifts meant for me, also. But I do not want to take them away from their home. This is where they belong. " Khan considered a moment longer, "Maybe my friends will be left in peace, if there are no treasures to steal."

Jim frowned a little and nodded sad agreement to that last statement, stepping forward to lightly press a kiss to Khan’s right cheek. “People can be terrible sometimes. I wish they- we- did not do the bad things we do.” He switched back to English, not knowing a lot of the words for his next sentence. “I believe we can learn much about your people and put together an exhibition for a major museum to display the artifacts you have donated. You can help teach the world about who your people were.”

"Yes, Jim. That is good." Khan said, happy to entrust his things to the Kirk family, and by extension Archer and his museum in Chicago. "My gift, to you and family. Thank you for, this." He said, meaning all the effort and support Jim and the others had shown during this expedition.

Jim squeezed his hand gently and said, “There’s no reason to thank me, Noonien. I’ve got more selfish reasons for helping than anyone else here.” He smiled at his new lover and lightly brushed their noses together. “Yes?”

"Selfish?" Khan smiled a little, but was slightly confused as well. "Khan does not see selfish, in Jim." He said, lightly closing his eyes as he enjoyed their closeness.

“Well, right now, I only think of you,” Jim confessed lightly. “I want to do whatever makes you
happy, Noonien, because that makes me happy. I don’t have the pure motives of everyone else ... not anymore.” He kissed the sweet expression on Khan’s face. “I hope you don’t mind that about me.”

"It makes me happy, to know, you like me. It makes me happy, to know, you like wolf-lion-man. It makes me happy, to know, you want to touch, be close. Khan want to touch, be close." Khan said quietly, "Before, Khan want touch, but no words to ask if Jim want touch Khan? Khan feel strong in heart about Jim. Want to kiss Jim."

Jim practically glowed by the end of this little speech by Khan, particularly the words ‘Khan feel strong in heart,’ which sounded an awful lot like I love you, but even nicer than those three words. “Jim feels strong in heart for Noonien. Jim trusts Khan with his heart.” He slid a hand into Khan’s hair and stroked the long, soft locks, smiling at him warmly. “I like touching you, Noonien. I want to very much.”

"Good. Happy." Khan said, leaning into Jim's fingers as they rubbed against his scalp and brushed out his hair. Arching his neck, Khan leaned in slowly, giving Jim time to respond to his intentions before kissing the other man on the lips. "Jim heart and Khan heart, happy."

Jim kissed back freely, enjoying the contact and wishing it could linger. But he heard the sounds of approaching footsteps, the rest of the party returning, hopefully with the missing goat. “Happy,” he echoed in quiet delight. “Yes, Noonien.” He stepped away as the voices neared them.

As predicted, the rest of the group burst in, looking triumphant. Winona led the way, looking disheveled, but proudly carrying a small bundle of bones. “We found them, right where Malcolm predicted they would be. Please, allow me to place them with your friend?”

Khan turned and nodded, "Thank you, friends." Khan said, looking to each, appreciating their efforts for something so small, but meant a great deal to him. "Yes, lay the goat with his caregiver. Lay together in sleep." Khan watched Winona, seeing how much she wanted to be involved, and get the traditions right.

Winona carefully set the bones out beside the proper remains and arranged them as instructed, touch gentle and assured. “There. All properly arranged?” She checked with Khan to make sure the arrangement was satisfactory.

"This is good." Khan said with a nod. "These friends are as they should be. This is where they belong." Khan said, knowing that the others understood, after all, they were here in support of the Kirk expedition to put things right.

“Are you sure there’s nothing else missing?” Winona asked. “No other pieces you wish returned to their rightful places?” She looked around the main room, at all of the new bedding and reconsecrated bodies.

"This is good." Khan repeated. "Friends are together, not alone. Their home, this land. The rest is a gift to Kirk family, and friends." He said, "You take all else. My gift to you."

Winona smiled and said, “That’s a most generous thing to offer us, Khan. For my family’s part, we want to donate the artifacts to a museum to put together a special exhibit about your people, with your permission.”

“You do not speak only for your family,” Malcolm assured. “I appreciate the offer, old chum,” he told Khan, “but if they’re not here, the history and art of your people should be preserved.”
"A museum is a good place. People can see and learn, yes? But do not touch. This is good." Khan said, still wishing he could give the others a gift of some sort, but did not have anything else, but the artifacts to give. He would have to ask Jim later, what would be appropriate.

"See and learn, but your heritage will be protected ... forever, if you want it to remain there," Winona said. "It's a good place. Jonathan Archer, Chris, Jim and I will make sure everything is arranged to your liking."

"Can show you items. What is their meaning. How to show to others." Khan nodded, then looked to the room. "Was here, a long time. Want friends protected, when I leave, again. How can we do this?"

Malcolm looked around the temple and said, "There are various traps that might be set to help keep people out and ways the entrance might be more permanently sealed, if you so desired. We could also spread some rather nasty rumors to discourage others from venturing this way."

"Yes." Khan said, thinking about the options. "Close the temple. Permanently. Will listen to more ideas, Malcolm." He said, giving one last look to the room before turning to leave. Heading back down the main hallway to the entrance to the temple where he could see sunlight again.

After a few seconds, the others followed after him, heading back into the sunlight, where they could determine a way to make sure that Khan's family might never be disturbed again.

During the heat and humidity of mid-day, it was common for work to be put on pause while the group ate, rested, or at the very least worked under the cover of the tents. For Khan, he took the opportunity to indulge in a light nap. Though he did not sleep much, that was not the point. He enjoyed soaking in the sounds of the land that would forever be the home and resting place to his entombed friends.

Jim, on the other hand, needed his sleep and stretched out comfortably on their shared bedding, dozing in the warmth of the day. He wore nothing except a rather unconcealing pair of undergarments, which hugged his curves front and back. They were nearly done packing to leave the temple area, with only a last few items left to pack and place in their wagons to carry out. Malcolm had designed some rather cunning traps, but the entrance of the temple still needed to be sealed. That would be left to Khan and himself to complete after the others had gone.

Everyone continued to work together marvelously, and Khan kept each of his new friends in his prayers to the gods. They were good people, and were becoming his new friends, his new brothers, and new sisters. But Jim was the one who occupied the largest part of his heart. It was Jim, who Khan would be spending his life with, loving, learning, exploring. Together.

Reaching out, Khan placed his hand on Jim's raised hip, and began to thumb over the thin fabric that kept him covered. Though no one intended it, since the day Jim had found Khan in the temple, the two had become inseparable. And as Khan laid there with his friend and lover, he smiled to himself, thinking of the hundreds and thousands of days to come that they would share just like this, laying together comfortably. Happy. Satisfied.
Jim sighed a little at the light touch and opened his eyes to look at Khan with just a hint of blur to
them. “Hello, Noonien,” he murmured. “Is it time to get up again?” He cracked a yawn that
turned into a smile, basking in the warmth of the air and his lover’s presence. “Did we not just lay
down?” He really felt like lying there a lot longer, close to Khan, where he was content. He
scooted forward to press a kiss to the closest bit of Khan’s skin, his outstretched arm.

"No, not time." Khan said quietly. "I wanted to touch you. But I am sorry I woke you up." Reaching
out with his other hand, Khan pressed his fingers through Jim's hair, petting the top of his head. "Go
back to sleep."

Jim wrinkled his nose as his expression became even more fond in the wake of Khan’s words. “I
don’t mind being woken for that reason, Noonien. I’m glad you want to touch me. It’s good to be
touched.” He arched into the fingers in his hair, doing his own imitation of a content cat. “We have
worked hard and long these past few days. Does it bother you that we’ll be done and leaving
tomorrow?"

Khan smiled at Jim's own cat-like responsiveness and continued to stroke his soft blond hairs as they
spoke to each other. "Everyone has done their best. The temple will be safe, and my friends secure in
their bed. I am satisfied by what has been accomplished. When we leave tomorrow, my mind will be
forward, thinking of future days, not past ones."

Well, that response deserved a kiss, and Jim moved forward to deliver one, tongue flicking tenderly
over Khan’s lips. “I want to create a future together. You and I. I’m glad you’re looking forward
to those days, as well.” He kept their faces pressed close, practically sharing breath, which he found
quite satisfying. There was a kind of rich happiness he found in Khan’s presence that he’d never
found with anyone else.

"Good. My future is with you." Khan lifted his head slowly up and down so that his nose would rub
against Jim, a friendly sort of teasing before brushing their lips to kiss. "Tell me what you see."

Jim blinked a few times and said, “So many possibilities, Noonien. Would you like to spend some
time at my home? Have a place where you can set down some roots? There will be time for us to
catalog and decide how to display your people’s artifacts. But we can stay for awhile on the farm, if
you would enjoy that.” He grinned at the rub to his nose, before returning it gently at the end of his
statement.

"This has been my home for a long time. I want new roots, with you." Khan said, rubbing his hand
over Jim's hip again with a little smile. "We can stay, settled in one place for a time, while I teach
others about my people and the artifacts. Then we go, where you go. You explore, I explore with
you. You stay home, I stay at home with you."

“I would like to do some more exploring in time,” Jim said, switching to English for the moment.
“My family, you included, can organize and carry out some expeditions together. We can return to
the right kind of archaeology, and with your guidance, do an even better job at making sure we
respect cultures we don’t understand fully.” He lightly nipped at Khan’s lower lip and then traced
his tongue over the same spot soothingly. “When we get home, back to Iowa, we can stay on the
farm awhile, until it feels like home to you, too."

"Hm-" Khan purred softly. "Yes, Jim. That is good. I like your vision of the future." He said,
cuddling up closer to Jim, even though they were still in the heat of mid-day. He was happy to be
leaving his home here, knowing things were resolved. His people were taken care of and his gifts
would be given to a museum where they would be appreciated and others could learn from them,
rather than something to abuse and sell.
The purr always affected Jim in a very positive way, and he took up an active stroking of Khan’s fine torso, neck and head to produce more of the sound. He brushed his mouth over the eyelids that protected his lover’s ice blue eyes. “Tomorrow, you and I will be finishing the sealing of your temple. May we say a blessing for everything you’re leaving behind?”

"Yes, Jim. That would be very thoughtful." Khan said in agreement, though the rest of him now basked in the attention Jim was giving him. He purred again and twisted in place, much like the feline side of him, resting on his back to expose his stomach and chest.

Jim rubbed Khan’s belly like he would in feline form, noting how much the man seemed to enjoy the touches. No matter man, wolf or lion, Khan always reacted very positively to having hands run over his stomach. “Do you like this, Noonien?” he asked, voice slightly teasing. “Want more?”

Khan smiled and laughed, head turned to the side as he watched Jim, clearly delighted. "Yes, Khan like. More. More is good," he said, reaching out to touch the side of his face with the palm of his hand.

“As much as you would like, Noonien,” Jim said and spread his fingers wider to encompass more of the sensitive area. He pressed a little more to add some massage to the touch. “Would it feel even better as a wolf or lion?”

"Feels good, always." Khan said with a smile for his friend and lover. "You want lion? You want wolf?" He asked, genuinely happy to take any form, especially if Jim preferred to play with one over another.

“I like all of your forms,” Jim said. “They’re all my favorite.” Playful, he leaned down and blew a raspberry on Khan’s stomach, something he could not do if it were covered in fur. “Noonien is my favorite.”

Khan yelped and twisted in place until he got up on all fours. He had never experienced that before and stared at Jim for some time, confused and startled and laughing. He did not know what that was. But he did know something similar. Launching himself forward, Khan reached out with both hands and began to tickle Jim at his sides and chest, a playful sort of attack.

Jim let out his own yelp and collapsed under the ‘attack,’ flailing a bit at the tickling. He was extremely ticklish, so he soon howled with helpless laughter, unable to escape. “I give up!” he yelled. “Help! I surrender!”

"Yes?" Khan laughed and smiled down at Jim, understanding that he was not truly in distress, but that it had been a sort of game to play. His hands settled on Jim’s sides finding enjoyment in just petting his skin as well. "Kiss?" He prompted, as a means of a peace offering.

Jim giggled for a moment longer and continued to grin up at Khan, lifting his arms to pull him down for a kiss. “Yes, please, kiss. Noonien fights mean.” He rubbed their noses together before sealing his mouth to Khan’s for a lingering moment. “So, no more raspberries?”

Khan settled gently over Jim and began to kiss him several times before pulling his head back. "Khan not mean to Jim." He said with a small frown. "Khan like Jim." He said and began to kiss him on the side of his face and neck.

Jim arched his neck and back in appreciation of the kisses and nuzzles to the sensitive skin, humming his own delight. “Jim love Noonien back. My heart is happy.” He caressed the soft hair of his head with tender hands and smiled up at him. “You did play mean, though.”
"Khan and Jim happy. But Khan sorry to play mean." He said and gave a few more apologetic and loving kisses to Jim's skin, working his way down to his collarbone and chest. "Be happy, Jim." He encouraged and nuzzled his neck.

"Jim is happy," he reassured his lover and lightly framed his face with both hands. "Are you happy with me?" Jim stroked over the planes of his back and wiggled his eyebrows. "Do you want to play with me?"

"Yes, Khan happy. Very happy." Khan said, turning his face into the palm of one of Jim's hands to nip at his fingertips. "Happy with Jim." He said with a smile, then glanced down at his friend. "How to play?"

"Well, there are many ways to play," Jim said with both mischief and a bit of seduction. He ran a thumb over his lips, eyes warm and getting warmer. "So many ways." He licked his lips with a flick of tongue.

Watching Jim with curiosity and fascination, Khan mimicked the behaviour, licking his own lips. "Show Khan."

Jim lowered his eyelids to half-mast, the innocent mimicking and request to be shown spiking his desire. "Noonien, you want me to show you more of how to be ..." He frowned, realizing he did not have the right word for their interaction. "Intimate," he finished in English. "How to be intimate." He tilted his head, staring up at his lover. "Would it be wrong to be intimate now?"

"Not wrong." Khan said and kissed Jim slowly on the lips. "Enjoy being intimate. Is good. You want to show Khan? You want to be intimate with Khan, now? Please, yes." He said and kissed Jim again, petting a hand down the front of his chest.

"Please, yes," Jim echoed in a low tone, delighted with the way Khan asked. "May I show you something new?" He allowed a hand to wander down and over Khan’s groin, just lightly teasing the bulge there. "We still have time before everyone wakes up."

Khan nodded once, but kept his eyes on Jim. "Yes. Show me. Khan learn." He said, very interested. After all, there was so much to learn with science and language since his time, surely there was something new to learn about sex and acts of intimacy.

"Let me sit up, and you lay down?" Jim asked, enjoying the interest in Khan’s expression. He hoped he could meet expectations ... and maybe even exceed them. "I need a bit more freedom to move." He cupped Khan’s cock through the material of his underclothes and squeezed. "Please, yes."

"Yes-" Khan said with a smile, gently leaning his hips into Jim’s hand. He gave his lover a light kiss before moving off him to lay on his back instead. "Tell Khan. Want to learn. Will listen."

"A lot of listening is going to be possible," Jim said and rolled easily to his knees, smiling down at Khan. He carefully began to work on removing Khan’s undergarment, glad neither of them favored some of the more complicated clothes. "I want to give you pleasure with my mouth, Noonien. Have you done that before?" He admired the lovely, long length as he freed it from the confines of material.

Accustomed to showing great care with those who were experiencing intimacy or a union blessing for the first time, Khan was very interested in being the one who was going to learn something new. "Mouth good." Khan said, though was eager to experience and offer new techniques to his lover.

"Oh, so you have," Jim said, a little disappointed, he wasn’t going to lie. Still, this was a first for
them, and he licked his lips again at the idea of taking his lover into his mouth. And perhaps a hint of trepidation lurked, too, since he had not attempted this act in years. But there was an easy way to get warmed up. With a soft moan of appreciation, he began to lap at the head with the enthusiasm of a kitten attacking a bowl of milk.

While the rest of his body relaxed, Khan's erection grew hard as Jim gently teased the head. He gave a sigh of pleasure, but did not speak right away. For Khan too, it had been a long time. So he watched, deeply aroused to have Jim give him such attention. "Khan enjoy." He said with a lick of his lips, "Jim enjoy?"

"Yes," Jim murmured. "Yes, so much. You taste ... clean, fresh, natural." He nuzzled into the heavy weight of Khan’s balls and then licked a long, wet stripe from base to tip. With a little pull of air, he sucked the head into his mouth and scraped his teeth just below, testing Khan’s responses. He remained careful, wanting to ensure he could take a thrust or sudden buck.

"Ah-" Khan groaned appreciatively, head tilting back on their bedding. His toes curled back against themselves, but otherwise he did not move. Perhaps because he was accustomed to inexperienced partners and was always mindful of keeping the encounter positive for them, so that they did not experience hurt or humiliation. So instead of making any demands, Khan simply laid back to enjoy himself and what skill Jim was showing him.

Jim pulled back and looked at Khan with a kind of quiet contemplation, though desire still warmed his chest. "You are literally a sex god," he mused quietly. "So, this is rather old hat to you." He pouted out his lower lip a little at the thought, but that melted away into a smile after a moment’s more thought. "I shall have to take the opportunity to allow you to teach me things then."

Sitting up on his elbows and forearms, Khan looked to Jim with a bit of a laugh. "Not a god. Khan speaks to the gods." He corrected, not quite understanding Jim. "Why, sad face, Jim? Am I wrong?" Thinking maybe he was not responding in the right way.

Jim slid his body sensually along Khan’s until he could catch his mouth in a light kiss. "No. Not wrong. My Noonien is just too good for me." He nuzzled against his face and pressed their foreheads together. "And you may only speak to Gods, but part of that speaking was through sexual contact with others. This is- it’s not the same connection for you as it is for me?" He voiced the last as an uncertainty, not yet sure how Khan really viewed sex.

"This is not a blessing. We are intimate, because we want to be, correct?" Khan asked, also uncertain of what was going on now. "We enjoy touch. Both Jim and Khan, together. Not about gods, right now. Only Jim and Khan."

"Yes, only us," Jim said. "That can be a blessing, too. Jim is just- well-" and he laughed a little at himself "unsure that he’s good enough. Khan has done blessing many times. Jim is only one man." He stroked over the strong chest, looking apologetic. "Jim is dumb."

"Jim is very good." Khan said with a smile, feeling that this was indeed a bit silly. Why was there any doubt? "Mouth, very nice." He said and kissed Jim sweetly. Keeping their faces pressed together for a moment, Khan then suggested. "Khan use mouth on Jim? Then, not so unsure?"

Jim shook his head and said, "I want to do this for you, Noonien." He shook himself mentally and pulled back, trailing kisses down the strong torso, pausing briefly to nibble at Khan’s left nipple. But he moved on quickly, exploring the line down from Khan’s breastbone to the small navel (which he dipped his tongue playfully inside) and then to the sparse, but dark, happy trail. He nibbled at the small hairs, tugging at a few with little growls.
Khan wanted to be relieved, but he was still worried about Jim. Perhaps modern men responded differently, perhaps Khan was doing something wrong. After all, it seemed to him that Jim knew exactly what he was doing, even though he expressed his doubts about not being good enough. But that worry evaporated when Jim began to lick at the skin over his stomach and play with the short hairs on his body. He laughed and squirmed in place, delighted by the sounds Jim made.

Jim laughed a little, too, glad that they could have fun in bed. He pushed down any remaining trepidation, drank in some fresh air, exhaled and then worked his mouth over Khan’s cock again. He held the base to keep the length best angled and just worked his way slowly down, swallowing inch after inch of the impressive erection. And when he suddenly found his mouth completely full, he paused, trying to ease his throat.

"Ahhh-" Khan groaned with a deep sigh. It felt like his muscles and bones were melting into the ground, while the heat of Jim's mouth took his cock. "Jim, Mouth. Good." Khan said, no longer able to hold himself up on his arms and simply slumped back down to lay out completely on his back.

Jim bobbed his head a few times, allowing himself to suck in a bit of air (as well as cock) and relax his throat a bit more. And on one particularly bold move, he allowed the erection past his normal gag-reflex and deep into his throat. He swallowed around the length once, twice, three times, before pulling all the way back off. The back of his throat ached a bit from the penetration, but he leaned in to do it again, just wanting to give his lover pleasure.

"Jim!" Khan called out, startled. His eyes were wide and his breathing hard. He had never felt anything like that. Lifting his head, Khan looked to Jim with some concern, even though his erection remained quite hard, and now very wet with saliva. "Jim, breathe? Jim ... amazing."

Oh, so that was something new! Jim made a low noise of pleasure as he lifted his head again to catch a little air. He demonstrated his breathing and said, "I’m glad you enjoyed that, Noonien," in a bit of a worn tone. And determined to repeat the pleasure, he slid his mouth all the way down again, deep into his throat, demonstrating superior breath control.

Khan felt his cock swell against the walls of Jim's throat, filling in the hot, wet mouth with great pleasure. Khan groaned again and dropped his head back down, writhing against the blankets. "Yes ... Jim." Khan whined, as an expression of desire.

Jim managed several more swallows, before pulling his head back again. He focused on the head of Khan’s cock again, sealing his mouth and sucking voraciously to try and draw out his release. He wanted to taste the salt and strangeness of Khan’s release, desiring that more than anything. With his free hand, he stroked the rest of his erection, coaxing and pleasuring in the movements.

Khan slid his left hand over his own chest as he took slow, deep breaths, and yet still gasping with excitement and pleasure. His hips rolled naturally, being easily coaxed by Jim's attention. "Jim-" Khan whined, toes curling again as his cock throbbed. It did not take long before the need for release could not be controlled any longer. So when he started to orgasm, Khan cried out softly, body ridged in place, in contrast to the blood pulsing and muscle spasm of his cock as he came in Jim's mouth.

There was almost more than Jim could handle, but he swallowed down the amounts with intense urgency, losing a little through the sides of his mouth, which trickled down his chin. The taste was at one familiar and original, something completely masculine and Khan. He did not cease his attentions until certain every drop was spent and then flicked his tongue over the slit a few times to make sure. “That was delicious,” he said, sitting back and looking smugly content.

"Wonderful." Khan said, sounding almost drunk. "Powerful. Good, Jim." He said, now with a purr to his voice as he reached out with his right hand for Jim, wanting to be close to him still.
Jim hummed contentment at the happy look on Khan’s face and took the offered hand, moving himself forward to lay out by his lover’s side. “Was that good, Noonien?” he asked tenderly. “You taste wonderful.” He kissed Khan’s mouth to share the flavor with him.

“Yes. Very, very good.” Khan said as he nuzzled their faces together, then kissed Jim again. "Feel, relaxed. Jim make Khan feel good." Kissing Jim again, Khan sucked gently at his lips and tongue to share the experience of his taste as well.

Jim deepened the contact eagerly at the signs of Khan’s willingness and stroked his soft hair, fistimg one hand into the strands. He held the kiss as long as he could stand, before falling back with a soft sigh. “That makes me happy to hear, Noonien.”

"Allow Khan to treat Jim to nice touch, also?” Khan suggested. Sliding his hands over Jim's torso, Khan followed lines of muscle and bone, so that he could provide sensual contact to all parts of his lover's body. He wanted Jim to feel good as well, if he still had the talent for it.

Jim’s eyelids fluttered as the strong, warm hands skimmed over his body with gentle knowledge. “Yes, Noonien, please. I want that very much. I want to know your touches, too.” He turned his head and sought the lips he’d already become addicted to, chasing their softness and skill and taste.

The two men kissed gently, then deeply, then began to tease each other with lips and tongues before Khan laughed with delight. "Good. Trust Khan. Turn over, please? Lay on front."

“Turn over,” Jim agreed and rolled on his front, showing his long, strong back to the other man. “I do trust Noonien. And I’m curious.” He looked over his shoulder at the other man, eyes brimming with interest as to what his new lover had in mind.

"Tell Khan if you like, or do not like. Yes? Please?” He said, not wanting Jim to sit through something if he did not like it. After all, maybe what Khan had to offer was not something people in this age liked. "One change.” He said however, needing to make one adjustment in the way Jim was laying out. And so reaching between and under his thighs, Khan gently grasped his lover's cock to lay it back between his parted thighs, rather then pinned between Jim's hips and the blankets.

And so with new access to Jim's cock, even while his lover was laying on his front, Khan used the back of his hand to stroke the skin a few times. "Good.” He said, then began to give the rest of Jim's body his attention, first by trailing his fingertips up the length of his lover's back, before massaging the muscles down his spine.

“I promise,” Jim said in Khan’s native tongue to make it a formal pledge. “I am sure I will enjoy whatever Khan does.” He settled very comfortably on his front, through he squirmed a little when Khan maneuvered his cock to rest between his legs. This was a little unusual, but Jim stilled to allow Khan to touch as he pleased. And when this proved to be a massage along his back, he let out a low, happy moan and nearly melted in place.

Taking his time, Khan worked his hands from the base of Jim's skull, down his back, to the lowest vertebrae. Here he would adjust Jim's narrow hips with a few gentle pops, squeeze the flesh of his ass, then work his way back up again. At times, even Khan groaned, as he helped give the tense muscles and joints relief.

After a few minutes, Khan slid his hands down Jim's sides to rest on his hips while Khan moved. Lowering himself to his own stomach as well, between Jim's legs, Khan began to dig his thumbs under the curve of Jim's ass, massaging deep into the tissue while he lower his head to lick at the head of lovely cock lying before him.
Khan's dexterity and flexibility delighted Jim thoroughly, and he pressed up into the skilled and new touches to the curve of his ass. He did not realize he could be tense there, but felt the muscles ease under his fingers. "Oh, that feels amazing," he murmured, slipping back into English. "I've never had anyone touch me this way before." He wanted to move some more into the touches, but refrained with some little difficulty.

Khan purred softly as he lifted his head, watching Jim breathe and taking note of his posture, wanting to ensure that he was feeling relaxed, since this was probably not the way people gave massages any more. With both hands, Khan continued to squeeze and release, squeeze and release the muscles down the back of Jim's thighs. As he did, Khan rubbed the tip of his nose against the inside of Jim's leg, seeking out a few soft hairs before gently sucking on his sac.

That contact made him whine very slightly, as it was something nobody had ever done before, not like this anyway. He gripped the material beneath his fingers tightly and twisted it in response to each suck. "Noonien. Oh. Oh, please. Please. More, Noonien. Never felt that before." He felt somehow free in his current position, although it also left him unable to move much.

Happy that this was something that Jim was responding well to, Khan continued to gently suck, then licked his tongue against the delicate skin. He groaned, enjoying the scent of his lover and the taste of his skin as he nuzzled his face in close to the back of Jim's thighs. He blew air on the wet saliva he had left on Jim's sac, then licked the skin again, teasing as he worked his way down the length of his erection, licking and blowing hot air until his lips were teasing the head.

Each puff of air over the damp, sensitive skin sent a shiver from Jim's toes to head and back again, until he writhed in place, moaning nearly constantly at the stimulation. He didn't know that such simple actions could cause him such pleasure. "Oh please, Noonien. Please. Need you." He didn't even know what he was asking for, really, just that he wanted as much as he could get.

Rubbing his hands down the back of Jim's legs, so that they came to rest on his calves, Khan held himself in place. His tongue slipped from his mouth and he used the tip to lick the slit of Jim's erection. But was Jim whined and writhed, Khan then took the head into his mouth, tongue caressing the edge as he began to suck on him slowly, savoring his taste and the sweet noises Jim made.

Jim enjoyed having his cock sucked, but the position made it that much more incredible somehow. He could not thrust into the warm, claiming mouth, but that made everything that much more intense and amazing. Khan was talented, too, knowing just how to use his tongue to cause the sweetest jolts through him. "Noonien …" he heard his voice hit a strange whining noise.

Khan smiled to himself and pulled his mouth off his lover for a moment. Sitting up on all fours, Khan began to stroke Jim by hand. "Can you, release?" Khan asked, even though he was unsure how to ask in a proper way. "Can you fill my mouth? Or against my skin? Tell me, please."

"Can you fill my mouth? Or against my skin? Tell me, please." Jim said, "Maybe if I eased myself up on my knees?" I don't know …" The position left him a bit uncertain about how his release might work. "Your mouth or you skin are good, Noonien. Perfect, even. Please." He shivered at the notion of covering Khan's pale skin with his fluids, a form of primitive claim.

"Yes, good." Khan said, wanting Jim to feel comfortable, especially after taking the time to give him a massage. Though he would have to give his feet and hands attention another day. "Sit up." Khan welcomed the suggestion and kissed Jim's backside. But as Jim moved, Khan lowered himself down onto his back, then wiggled a little on the blankets so that his head was between Jim's thighs, so that he could continue to lick at his lover's shaft, nuzzling the skin and purring with delight as his senses were smothered with the scent, taste, and sight of his lover.
“Oh God,” Jim groaned at the way Khan took up his new position and nearly came right that second. Only a protracted effort kept him from doing so. Khan’s lying on his back just below Jim’s aching erection provided an erotic scene beyond any Jim had ever experienced before. “Noonien. I’m so close. I can’t hold out much longer.”

Khan looked up at Jim, face relaxed and eyes half closed with pleasure as if he were a lion right now, laying in the sun. He purred and nuzzled against Jim again, kissing the inside of his thigh. Then tilting his head back, Khan opened his mouth just enough, tongue flat and presenting to Jim, an offer. His mouth. His face. His neck. Anything Jim wanted, Khan demonstrated only willingness.

Jim lost any hold on his control as Khan offered him whatever he wanted. Biting down on his lower lip to keep the whole camp from hearing him cry out, he erupted jet after jet of semen all over Khan’s face and into his mouth. His arms buckled, but he managed to keep his knees under him, ass end up, as he continued to orgasm until spots appeared in front of his eyes.

After breathing deep, Khan let out a low groan, enjoying how it felt to have Jim cover his face and lips with slick. "Good." Khan said, basking in the feeling, then began to swallow, lick his lips, then swallow again.

Jim dropped his head to the ground with a little groan of nearly despairing delight, watching Khan with wide, hazy eyes as he happily allowed himself to be covered in Jim’s release. “You are a sex god,” he told him without any doubt. “Look at you, Noonien. You’re … uninhibited. Wild. Beautiful. My beautiful Noonien.”

"Happy to be Jim's, Noonien." Khan said, tilting his head so that he could look at Jim. He licked his lips a few more times, but made no move to clean his face. Instead he kissed the inside of Jim's thigh, and when some cum was transferred onto Jim's skin, Khan promptly licked it off from there too.

Jim could not help the giggle that escaped him at the ticklish lick to his thigh and rolled to his side, landing with a bit of a thud. He did not stay still long, however, scrambling to find his place next to his lover to kiss him. He than began to clean Khan’s face with his own tongue, using broad sweeps to cover the most skin. His flavor, mixed with the salt of Khan’s skin, mingled over his tastebuds. "My Khan.”

Khan chuckled and smiled and vocalized in small playful yips and groans as Jim licked his face. "Thank you." He said with a laugh, though reached out to rest his hand on Jim's hip as they now cuddled together on the blankets.

“No need to thank me, Noonien,” Jim said with deep satisfaction. “That was amazing. You are a wonderful lover. I am very lucky to have you in my life.” He curled around Khan, wrapping one leg over his lover’s and slinging an arm around his shoulders. “I love you, Noonien. So much.”

Khan purred softly, wrapping his arms around Jim in return. Pressing their heads together, Khan lightly closed his eyes, basking in the powerful force that kept them connected. "I love you, Jim. You are my new family."

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