

A Galaxy of Spiderwebs

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A Galaxy of Spiderwebs

by [I_Got_Lost](#)

Summary

Jim Kirk lives in a galaxy of spiderwebs. He has his kids, his crew, and the surety that the monsters that haunted his childhood are dead and long gone. Until, suddenly, one of them isn't.

And it isn't the one that is easy to kill.

-AOS Star Trek with mythos from Coraline and other fae stories.

Edit: starts in Iowa before Tarsus IV and runs during that time as well

Notes

This one, as always, is from a challenge and dare from Hazzardkitty. I don't know how often this will be updated but fear not, I actually have a plot!

As always, have fun, enjoy, and please don't shoot me!

-Lost

Chapter 1

“What is your name, citizen?” The android drones.

Jimmy has got two skinned knees, the heat of the sun on his back, and blood running down his palms. He looks up to the looming hunk of tin, chokes on the dust in his lungs and on his shirt, does his best to pretend there isn't a cliff behind him, and says “My name is James Tiberius Kirk.”

(This would be the last time for over a decade Jimmy would say his name with pride.)

There is a car smashed to bits in the canyon behind him and Jimmy can't help but grin as the smoke raises lazily into the air. Later, he will feel sick. Later, he will realize how close to death he had come. But later is still far off for the moment. His heart is beating like a drum in his ears, there are pinpricks of excitement and joy curling around his arms and settling into his fists.

He did it.

James Tiberius Kirk.

He drove that car. He smashed it to bits. He drove it off the cliff. (Later he will add on that he broke at least five laws, trespassed through six different fields, and pissed off Starfleet enough they actually pressed charges. How was he supposed to have known there was the bones of a starship being put together at the bottom of the canyon? How was he to know he blew up the beginning of the reborn Enterprise?)

Frank always said he got the wild from his father and none of the brains of his mother. Sam always muttered that Jimmy was too quick for such a slow brain.

Jimmy didn't care. He had done it. He had proven there was a way to be a Kirk in Frank's house. There was a way to be something more than a broken little boy from a broken little family. Sam would have to come back. Sam would have to admit Jimmy was right. Sam would have to...

Jimmy was picked up by the back of his too big leather jacket and his grin didn't drop from his face until hours later when it finally dawned on him, sitting at the station, his jacket piled up under his head and his back against the desk of the night clerk, that no one was coming.

Sam wasn't coming.

Frank's screams still echoed in his ears from the comm link in Jimmy's dad's car, and Jimmy didn't think anyone could ever call Winnia back from the black unless George somehow popped back up at the door and apologized for being so late. Jimmy was twelve years old, stuck at a police station, and slowly realizing that no one cared. No one cared that he had proven you could be a Kirk and still be planet side. No one cared that Jimmy was alright. No one cared further than the fact there was a car in ruins at the bottom of a ravine.

The police kept asking if Jimmy knew what he had done, and curled up against the desk, Jimmy was starting to realize that all he had done was smash a car. As far as the universe cared, Jimmy had simply proven an angry old farmer and Sam right.

His body was too quick for his brain.

Jimmy curled into the jacket and pretended his fingers didn't slip over holes from where Sam had taken a knife to George's old Starfleet patches sewn into the fabric.

...***...

Jimmy was born into screams and the ruins of an exploding Starfleet ship. It was only fitting he would be damned off world into a work program under the same circumstances.

The judge slammed a gavel down onto the counter and peered over an old battered padd at Jimmy. "You, young man, are incredibly lucky Starfleet is going to drop the worst of the charges."

Sitting and staring at the steel counter, Jimmy cynically wondered how any of this is luck. He's twelve years old. His mother refuses to appear even over comm, Frank doesn't actually have guardianship, let alone parental rights, and his life has just been sold to the fleet.

Fleet already took his father, claimed his mother, and stole the light from his brother's eyes. Now Jimmy owes the next five years to working for the fleet. His body has already been sold, what is the fleet going to take next? His soul?

Jimmy was born into screams and an exploding starship, he'll be damned if he goes out the same way.

...***...

Jimmy is twelve years old. He's got anger beat into bruises on his back and ribs. His knuckles have never been clear of scrapes since he was old enough to remember, and he's got a too quick body and a too slow mind.

Jimmy is twelve years old, he is dying by inches in a corn field and the day of his sentencing, he is hauled out onto an old tub of a hauler to be dragged off world. The small crew takes one look at him and doesn't see Jame Tiberius Kirk, the Kelvin Baby. They see a pissed off little pint sized brawler and think *we can work with this* .

The four months Jimmy is on the hauler, Neverland, he is never idle. The crew of sixteen have him work every station on the ship and force him to learn off every padd they have hidden away on board. Jimmy learns how to fix a warp core on the same day he learns how to accurately navigate an asteroid belt, and he is the only one who is surprised at the sheer joy these tasks alight in his eyes.

Jimmy was born into a family of geniuses, there was never any doubt that he wouldn't be the same. Jimmy is angry and the crew of the Neverland don't try to tell him not to be. They all saw the shiner he walked onto the ship with and they all read the report given by the juvenile

detention facility, but these men and women were also children once and they pushed aside the warning in the file. Instead, they teach the boy to throw a punch, stitch a wound, curse in such a way a Kiligon would blush, and they push him to be so much *more* .

Jimmy is twelve years old, he has anger burning through his veins and every day, that anger is slowly losing the kindling it had been choking on. Jimmy isn't saved by the Neverland, but it is the first time since he was a toddler that someone looked at him and thought the stars would reach down for this blond haired boy and snatch him away.

The crew looked at Jimmy Kirk and they wondered why no one had ever cared.

...***...

Jimmy turns thirteen years old elbow deep in the comms panel of the Neverland and two months out from Tarsus IV. For his birthday, he is given a small piece of replicated apple pie and a cup of ginger ale.

It is the first time he has ever celebrated his birthday.

The crew pretends they do not see his wobbly smile or the tears in the corners of his eyes. What they do instead is slap down a padd that holds the information needed for a Starfleet academy to print his 'high school diploma' since he tested out of the courses.

Jimmy technically hasn't even finished elementary school.

The Captain smiles over a cup of coffee as black as the universe outside the porthole. "Did you think we just having you underfoot for our own sake?"

Jimmy doesn't bother to give this an answer. (He is there under court order after all.)

The Captain taps the padd with a finger. "You did the work. Most of it was caught verbally and transcribed, but congratulations kiddo, you're a minted high school graduate. All you have to do is sign."

Jimmy looks down at the padd and then twists in his seat to stare at the fleet Officer that had been sent along for the ride to ensure Jimmy made it to the workhouse, and had instead melded perfectly into the engineering department.

The captain follows his gaze. "Yup, he signed off on it too."

The officer (Jimmy had never bothered to learn his name. Too angry and stubborn to more than acknowledge the man as 'avoid at all cost') lifts a cup and smiles. "All you needed was your guardian to sign, and well, here I am."

Jimmy looks down at the padd and hopes his embarrassment isn't showing on the tips of his ears.

"Come on, Kirk. Sign it!" one of the navigators shouts as they burst through the door, juggling padds in their hands. "You really don't want to do high school twice."

“J.T.” Jimmy says, his hands shaking a bit as he picks up a stylus and scrawls out a chicken scratch signature. “I’m a teenager now, I think J.T. is a bit more appropriate.”

He doesn’t say that Jimmy got left behind somewhere between the ravine and a corn field. He doesn’t say that being James Tiberius Kirk felt like a horrid joke from the moment the comm to his mother just kept ringing and ringing and ringing. He doesn’t say that in the bowels of the Neverland, J.T. echoed clearly and with authority while Jimmy dropped between Jeffery tubes and the warp core.

The captain’s lips twitch up into a small smile and J.T. is given another slice of pie. “I hope you know this doesn’t mean you get out of your shift at the scrub down, J.T.”

J.T. lets himself groan. “Aw, but it’s my birthday!”

(For the first time, this doesn’t feel like a sin.)

...***...

J.T. steps out onto the landing zone on Tarsus IV and wonders if he ever left Iowa. Sure, the grass is an odd shade of green and the wheat swaying in the distance looks more like a winter crop than a spring growth, and the sun looks a little too small in the sky, but it's Iowa.

Corn field, cows, and all.

Fair Harvest

Chapter Notes

drops chapter 2

Hey look! A chapter!

as always, have fun, enjoy, and please don't shoot me!

-Lost

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

J.T. sets down onto Tarsus IV, and he doesn't hate it. The 'fleet officer that came down with him, gives him a salute, a smile, and points him towards a farmhouse in the distance. The man only sticks around long enough to ensure J.T. makes it to the farm house, and then he's gone. Back to the stars. In the end, he's just another figure in the long list of people that have left little Jimmy Kirk all alone in the world.

J.T arrives on Tarsus IV with a two month old high school diploma and a padd full of first year starfleet academy courses. He has a duffle bag full of Sam's clothes, his dad's old leather jacket, and a body too fast for his brain. (He leaves Tarsus IV with a leather jacket, no shoes, and a full year of starfleet academy under his belt.)

The farmhouse J.T. is directed to, is as new as the colony. Supposedly, the house was built to take in 'troubled youth' and 'redirect them towards the better path'. In reality, it's cheap labour for a colony that relies mainly on homegrown produce to maintain the food supply. Fair Harvest, (J.T. will forever gag at the name, first for the tacky logo that is forced into his face, and second because of what comes later) takes J.T. in without a second thought.

He doesn't know if the judge was aware that Fair Harvest hadn't been up and running for long, or that J.T. is technically the only 'troubled youth' there. Oh, there are other kids running around, but they certainly aren't there on court orders. Most days, Fair Harvest resembles a community centre more than anything else, and J.T., too young and too cynical, can't help but *hate* the children. It's nothing personal, but the hatred and the *longing* curls around his ribs just as equally as shame.

(J.T. looks at the children of Tarsus IV and the patches torn out of his jacket *burn* against his skin.)

J.T. doesn't know what Fair Harvest had expected of him, but he knows that Miss Mellony, the organizer of Fair Harvest, stands on the porch and simply stares down at a clipboard in dismay. Fair Harvest might not know what to do with him but they don't know what to do with anyone else either.

J.T. has only been on Tarsus for a week and already, he has been sorted through three different groups and demoted to messenger. There are no general-use vehicles on Tarsus, or at least, none that aren't designated for space travel. There are, of course, tractors and small four wheelers, but they're for the farms, and only for the farms. However, Tarsus does have a rudimentary planet wide comms system, but that doesn't do much for a farming community. Tools and parts still need to be fairied around the settlement and J.T. as one of the oldest children, can carry more than the other messengers conscripted for the cause.

J.T. isn't a soft child, not by a long shot, but the longer he stays on Tarsus, the more he seems to settle. He's still got anger wrapped around his ribs but the desperation that had sharpened his teeth begins to spill away into a gentle contentedness. Here, there is no Frank, no Winnoa, no one shaking their heads that 'little Jimmy Kirk is squandering everything his father ever gave him'.

J.T. still has walls wrapped around his heart and his soul, and he is liable to bite anyone who comes too close. (Later, he will acknowledge that this is what saved him.) But even these walls begin to shudder.

J.T. wears a Fair Harvest shirt as a uniform and never before has he wanted to burn anything as much as that stupid little smiley face silk-screened onto the poly-cotton he throws on every day. But the shirt identifies him as one of the charges of Fair Harvest (the only charge). And when David Adams comes crashing into J.T.'s life, it is with a glance at his shirt and a wailing toddler thrust into his arms. J.T. is thirteen and he cannot *stand* children. (He cannot stand the way the kids look up at their parents as if they hung the stars and the moon in the sky on a whim. He cannot stand the way they look at their parents as if they could do no wrong.)

He grabs hold of the toddler by instinct and he is not sure who is more surprised, himself, or the little girl. The two of them stare at each other for a long moment. The little girl was frozen, her mouth wide open, and J.T. still holding her close. (J.T. has only ever been the youngest. Has only ever had to deal with the expectations of the older generations bearing down on him.) He is stuck, frozen in this unimaginable horror that if he even breathes wrong, the little girl will begin to scream once again.

He doesn't know why he does it. Why he lifts up a hand and ever so slowly drags a finger down the little girl's nose, only to poke her gently when the girl becomes cross eyed trying to follow the movement. (He will never know, but Sam, before everything had fallen to pieces, had once done the same. Had taken a crying Jimmy in hand and slowly lulled him to sleep with gentle fingers tracing patterns into his brother's skin.)

The little girl couldn't be more than a year, too baby to be anything else, and J.T. is absolutely enthralled. She has two little pigtails bound at the back of her head and J.T. can see the tips of two little perfectly pointed ears poking through her black hair. Instead of a ruddy red gracing her puffed up cheeks, J.T. watches as her pale skin turns a dark mossy green.

(On Earth, Sam used to drag Jimmy down to the creek and the two of them would go hunting for cave trolls and fairies. On Tarsus, J.T. holds onto a little girl and half wonders if he should be checking for glossimer wings and inside-out shirts.)

"What's your name little one?" J.T. eventually manages to breathe, his arms becoming a little deadened to her weight.

(J.T. doesn't know it yet, but this little girl becomes the first of his kids. She will not be the last.)

It is in the absence of her wails that Miss Mellony comes walking off the porch of Fair Harvest and trots up to J.T. with the frazzled man from earlier in tow. "Mr. David Adams and his daughter Sarah," she says, her face split with one of her ever present smiles, "are your new neighbours, Jimmy!"

J.T. would typically be gnashing his teeth and snarling that his name is 'J.T., thank you very much. Can't you read?', but little Sarah has one hand tangled in his shirt and another wrapped around the bottom of her jacket, and J.T. can't seem to care.

David extends a hand and J.T. makes a sort of shrug as best he can under the circumstances, none too willing to give up Sarah or try and juggle her weight with one arm. David, still frazzled and definitely embarrassed, aborts the movement and scrubs his hand along the back of his head in an all too human gesture. "Ah, yeah. Sorry about that. I just got a bit caught up in the, well... nevermind that, I can take her back."

David's got a voice like a rolling drum and a broken chord. Grief wrapped up in the bitterness of something J.T. doesn't want to recall. (His mind calls up memories of ripped up patches, photo albums torn out of his hands, and empty bottles instead of birthday cakes.)

J.T. holds Sarah a little bit tighter.

"Nah, I got her." J.T. says as he unconsciously angles himself to stand between David and Sarah. J.T.'s thirteen. He's old enough to know that adults lie and parents are the ones who will hurt you the most. (He's got the scars to prove it.)

There's a dozen different expressions that cross David's face, but it is that last one that makes the world of worries roll off J.T.'s shoulders. David has a soft little smile and a wonder in his eyes when he looks at his baby girl that makes something shattered in J.T.'s heart slowly begin to mend. It's not an instant fix and J.T. still doesn't like kids, but this? This is something different. This is something new.

"Well, in that case." David says, his head jerking towards the farmhouse, "why don't you come in with my little angel and we can get to know each other."

In the next few hours, J.T. learns several things about his neighbors. The first, is that David had been married. 'Had been' being the key phrase. His Vulcan wife had unfortunately passed away shortly after Sarah's birth and David had taken his daughter to the stars just after her first birthday. He had hoped to give his baby girl a fighting chance somewhere where her mixed blood didn't matter as much as her character did.

J.T. looks down at the little vulcan girl and wonders how anyone could think her less because of her blood. (He doesn't ask why David had not stayed with his wife's clan. He doesn't ask

why his daughter has a very human name while having a very vulcan appearance. He does not ask how the man expects to raise a little girl, a vulcan to boot, all alone.)

J.T. looks down at a little girl who smiles up at him full of blind trust and faith, and for the first time in his life, he means it when he turns and says "welcome home."

...***....

Sarah tottles after J.T. every time J.T. walks through her field of vision. She is constantly begging for J.T. to pick her up, walk her around, and give endless one sided conversations. In some ways, Sarah is the only reason J.T. sits down and finishes his 'fleet courses. She sits on the edge of his bed during the day when David is out in the fields, and J.T. desperate for some way to entertain her, spills his essays and coursework to her as if it were the most fascinating bedtime stories imaginable.

(Entertaining Sarah is excellent preparation for what comes next, not that J.T. knows it at the time.)

Soon, keeping Sarah occupied changes to keeping Miss Mellony's nephew Kevin, entertained as well. Then it turns into helping Tommy with his homework when he popped over for the after school programs put on by Miss Mellony. Little Annie and Jacob follow soon after. Before J.T. knows it, he's got half a dozen kids and well, he doesn't hate it.

He doesn't hate the kids anymore, not really. He's still got shame wrapped around his ribs as if it were armour, but the sting fades every time one of the kids (his kids) looks up at him with a gap tooth smile. J.T. is thirteen years old and for the first time in his life, he thinks that maybe, just maybe, everything will be alright.

(J.T. was born into exploding ships and dying screams, it is only fitting he lives the same way.)

Then, the mold crawls into the crops.

And then, there is that *doll*.

Chapter End Notes

I seem to have a lot of fics with characters who love the stars and the sky.

The Beginning of the End

Chapter Notes

Hi everybody!

I have a new chapter and my dudes, Tarsus IV should be its own warning to be honest.

As always, have fun, enjoy, and please don't shoot me.

-Lost

There are a lot of things J.T. could tell you about Tarsus IV. He could tell you that the sunset looked beautiful and the false dawn always brought in a soft cautious warmth and colour to the otherwise monochrome fields. He could tell you that the community was more communal then competitive and that the neighbors pitched in to help even when times weren't tough. He could tell you that the work crews and the land owners were made up of hard working people. He could tell you that the planet was tough, but the people were strong.

He could tell you that the whole planet was made up of lies.

Tarsus IV was a colony. A Little place tucked away in the corner of the galaxy and set just outside of the regular trade routes. Oh, the project was certainly Federation sanctioned, J.T. wouldn't have been sent to Fair Harvest if Tarsus IV hadn't been. But, there was a difference between sanctioning a colony and publicly backing a colony.

Tarsus IV was the Governor's pet project and everybody on the planet knew, *he* held the authority, not the 'fleet.

Star Fleet had nothing to do with Tarsus IV. Aside from signing a paper that gave a charismatic man authority on a planet barely in the jurisdiction of the Federation's reach. The Governor had the start up capital, the support, and the drive to ensure the colony remained stable for the first few years when the Federation would be unable to ensure trade routes would routinely swing by the planet.

However, from the beginning, Tarsus IV had a bit of a reputation. The colony wasn't well known. Tarsus IV had been started up around the same time some celebrities over on Risa had gone on a bender and the initial start up had gotten lost in the publication stunt. But, word had gotten out regardless.

If you wanted a fresh start. If you didn't mind hard work. If you wanted to escape and reinvent yourself. You went to Tarsus IV. Although, you couldn't just hitch a ride to Tarsus IV. Either you applied for acceptance and were sent a ticket, with a packet of legal jargon that ensured you were aware the first two years of your pay, no matter your job, would be put towards paying for your ticket. Or, you pissed off the 'fleet, and they dropped you to the planet side with no way off.

J.T. was one of the latter.

David and Sarah were of the former.

So, when the whispers of disease in the crops began to surge around the colony, everyone understood this matter was going to be dealt with in house. The Federation did not have an outpost on Tarsus IV, the colony was still too new, but the beauty of the modern era meant contact to the nearest outpost was only a vid-call away. If the Tarsus IV colonists were unable to safely deal with the situation, 'fleet could be sent to ease the problem in little more than a week.

(J.T.'s trip had taken little over three months, but that was the difference between a hauler and a constellation class starship.)

Tarsus IV was made up of farmers and farm hands that had come searching for new land and new life. Some of them had had lands passed from parent to child for generations, and it was only the thought of new horizons that had brought them out into space.

J.T. was thirteen. He was one of the oldest children on the planet. He was also the only probationary member of Fair Harvest. He had no complaints about the disease being treated in house. Why would he?

J.T. was only a messenger.

Aside from the whispers of disease, most colonists had simply shaken off the failure of one field as a fluke. An isolated incident at best. Tarsus IV was an agricultural community after all and their job was to terraform the planet. That field must just have had bad seed or some native bug had mutated.

Overall, Tarsus IV had seen no cause for alarm.

Sure, the disease hadn't stayed isolated and yes, a few fields had been razed, but it simply meant more canning and a few more hot houses would have to be installed. The kids would be pulled in to help maintain the winter crop and everyone would just have to get their hands dirty. The colony was still new in the grand scheme of things and this failure was simply a small stumbling block. Besides, the Federation was only a comm away.

For the first time in his life, J.T. decided to trust the system.

(For the first time, he pushes down the instinct that kept him one step ahead of Frank's swinging fists and Sam's razor sharp tongue.)

For the first time, J.T. looks away.

(It doesn't last.)

J.T. can't find it in himself to hate Tarsus IV.

How can he hate the planet when he has David and little Sarah?

The occupants of Fair Harvest might be holding on by a shoestring budget, but isn't that what this place is supposed to be about? Fair work, for fair wages? J.T. and David work hard and they work long hours, but...

There is something wrong.

J.T. had seen hints of it, all those months ago when he had bounced from crew to crew. There isn't just one thing J.T. can point towards. Oh, he can point to the mold. He can point to the dying fields and the ash covered trails, but J.T. does not hate Tarsus IV, not yet. He doesn't hate Tarsus IV yet, not even when Sarah's clumsy attempts at throwing and catching a cartoonish ball crash to a halt at the sight of white mold dusting Miss Mellony's window box.

He doesn't hate Tarsus IV when he gets pulled into the fields and he walks for kilometers upon kilometers, up and down the rows, not daring to touch a single fruit for fear of it crumbling into rotting dust.

It's just like home, he thinks one night when he gathers Sarah in his arms and stares up at unfamiliar stars. One year it is drought, the next it is flooding. Some years there are the bugs too resilient from pesticides used generations ago and all but insatiable with their hunger. Other years it was just a bad season. The winter was too harsh or never frozen the ground enough to replenish the fields. The spring was too short or started too late. The summer was too hot and the autumn brought only the early frost.

James was born into screams and exploding ships. Jimmy was raised with the sun on his back and dead fields under his feet. J.T. was shaping up to be the same.

The mold spreads.

The Governor maintains that everything is under control and those affected simply have to come into town to receive stipends and rations to hold them through the coming winter.

J.T. keeps a running tally of those families packing up and leaving for town. He knows it's a bit morbid and probably a touch obsessive, but David relies on those families to keep him employed and J.T. is just keeping an eye out.

He's just keeping an eye out.

(He pretends he doesn't see Miss Mellony tsk at the bare cupboards.)

Ten families, roughly sixty-three people in total, leave to relocate in town for the winter. There are rumours that the labs in town are hiring data clerks.

J.T. keeps an eye out.

Sixty-three people leave.

J.T. is sent into town to deliver a package to the bakery three days after the final family picks up to make the move. With him, he brings a doll one of the kids had left behind at Fair Harvest. After the package had been delivered, J.T. asked after the families, hoping to drop the doll off and head back as soon as possible.

There had been forty-five adults and eighteen children. J.T. could name every single person. Yet, the general consensus in town was that those families had never existed on Tarsus IV at all. J.T. tucks the doll into his bag and tries not to think about it. (He ducks out of town as quickly as he can. The eyes of the colonists bore holes into his back as he leaves.)

Sixty-three people don't just suddenly vanish. (His fingers itch to pour over a padd and scamper through files until he finds something, *anything*.) Eighteen children.

(Johnny. Amed. Sylvia, Entergy, Christopher, Terrance, Novalynn....)

He pulls out his padd the moment he gets home, and Sarah, long used to this action equating to story time, climbs up onto his lap with a smile.

(Jenny. Silas. James. Abraham...)

J.T. can't find it in himself to give her a story. Not right now. Not when he's trying to find out why everyone pretended sixty-three people never existed.

He gives her the doll instead.

(He pretends the button eyes don't freak him out. He has bigger problems to worry about after all.)

...***...

Something is wrong and eventually, J.T. can't rationalize away the anxiety eating at his spine and gnawing on his lungs. He can't find a trace of the missing people. He can't even find a flight ticket or a comm number.

Fair Harvest was meant to be an organization to help *break* the behaviours J.T. had brought with him from Iowa. In a great twist of fate J.T. cannot help but marvel over, it was almost sad how well Fair Harvest managed to help him hone those behaviours and skills.

It isn't hard for him to start pocketing a power bar from his lunches and sticking it in his desk drawer. In reality, it should be concerning how quickly J.T. turns to pocketing small items from the work crews. He takes the little things, the bits and pieces that no one cares about. He takes snacks and tools. He takes charging cords and match boxes. He never takes anything he cannot explain away with a smile and the longer this goes on, the more he can rationalize away. He thinks David might know, if the long looks the older man gives him in the early mornings are any indication. But, thankfully, David says nothing at all.

J.T. doesn't know if the silence gives him permission to continue or not, but he's come this far. He isn't going to stop now.

Of course, Sarah catches him organizing his go-bag one evening and the little girl is absolutely fascinated. If it had just been Sarah who had tottered into his room, J.T. might have been able to distract her and finish up in a few minutes. But little Kevin comes scampering in behind her and Tommy just a few steps behind him. And with that, the whole jig is up.

At first, Sarah thinks the whole thing is great fun, a secret just for her and J.T. (J.T. never tells her it is anything but a game, he doesn't think he could even if he tried.) And J.T. begins to treat the whole thing like a game, he ropes in all *his* kids from the after school program.

It starts with a box. Nothing big. Nothing that can't be explained away or grabbed easily while on the move. He has all his kids make one. Water bottles, band aids, flashlights, light painkillers, power bars, extra padds and charging banks. The whole thing could probably fit in Sarah's favourite plush.

J.T. tells the kids that they had just made a first-aid kit. He tells them they should be *proud*.

(In the doorway, Miss Mellony gives him a fierce nod. It doesn't make him feel better.)

Tommy, only eleven, adds in a small utility knife.

(Something in J.T.'s heart *breaks*.)

...***...

"Don't go." J.T. begged. He has Sarah curled into his shoulder. The little girl has one hand pinned between their bodies, the other is thrown about J.T.'s neck and curled into his too long hair. J.T. isn't above using his image to get what he wants, and if looking like a pitiful little waif will get him even an iota of attention, he will take it.

David doesn't listen.

(No one ever does.)

"It's alright," David said with a smile that was too human. (Too trusting.) "I've just been assigned to a new work group in the village. A couple of the environmental scientists and engineers want some help designing a pesticide that can cull the mold without damaging the winter crops or long term growth."

J.T. wasn't stupid. He *knew* why David was being called into town.

Sixty-three people don't just disappear.

J.T. had done a lot of walking during his time on Tarsus. Most of it was unsanctioned trips through the brush and galavanting through the low part of mountains and fields. J.T. didn't know every inch of Tarsus, but he knew enough. He knew enough to know that there was no way in hell Old Man Jin would leave his homestead unattended, the door thrown off its hinges, and chickens loose in the yard.

The men from town who had come to lock down the homestead had said Jin had committed suicide. J.T. doesn't know any form of suicide that puts a phaser bolt through the *back* of one's head.

He knew enough to be able to recognize that the ration packs were getting smaller and more infrequent.

He knew enough to recognize that *nothing* should have stopped J.T. from being able to upload his assignments to his dropbox. But J.T. is thirteen years old. He is just shy of turning fourteen. He is a delinquent, a criminal, and a good for nothing *child*. (Maybe if he were older, he would be able to explain what was wrong. He would be able to put all the anxiety, the fear, the *knowledge*, into words. But he is only a child and he doesn't have the words to explain what is wrong.)

J.T. does not hate Tarsus IV but he thinks he might be getting there soon.

David gives J.T. a small smile and J.T. can't help but hold Sarah closer. (He won't be like Sam. He's not going to leave her behind. He'll follow even if David isn't his father. Sarah is *his*, in all the ways Sam *isn't*.) J.T. trusts David. He does. (He wouldn't be warning the man if J.T. didn't like him.)

(J.T. has never known what it was like to have a father, but he knows exactly what it feels like to lose one.)

"There is something wrong." J.T. says. He can't look David in the eye. Doesn't know how to explain what is wrong. Is too used to being told to *shut up and sit still*.

Nothing he says will be news anyways. The crops are dying. Food has been rationed. Ground wells are a hit and miss for contamination. The last supply ship that was supposed to arrive a few weeks back, had never come.

Fleet was investigating.

(Were they really?)

The Governor had promised relief and contact with the 'fleet.

(J.T. can't even access his school room chat.)

The Governor had promised all essential work would be continued.

(J.T. is on probation. He is supposed to check in with an officer from 'fleet biweekly. In the past four weeks, his padd hasn't even so much as dinged with an intergalactic notification.)

The Governor had promised that there was enough food to maintain their lifestyle until relief arrived.

David gives J.T. a long look. There is something different about his face, J.T. notices in a sullen silence. The lines are harsher around his eyes. His cheeks are no longer so full and laughter flushed.

Very slowly, David tucks his padd into his back pocket and he drops down to sit on his heels. "Jimmy," he says, one hand coming up to card through J.T.'s hair. (He's the only one allowed to do that. Who can call J.T. 'Jimmy'. He's the only one allowed to touch, tuck, and grapple with J.T.)

(He's the only one that *matters*.)

"Jimmy," David repeats, his hands landing on J.T's shoulder and Sarah's head, "how about you keep Sarah here? You stay here with Miss Mellony and I will be back in two shakes of a lamb's tail." He cards his hand through Sarah's hair one more time. "Two days, Jimmy. I'll be back in two days."

J.T. chews on the corner of his lip and can't help the way he shakes his head ever so slightly, Sarah still asleep in his arms as he takes a step back.

David's hands fall to his side. "You take care of her."

"I will." J.T. says. The words drop down onto J.T.'s shoulders and claw responsibility into his ribs.

David gives him a small nod as he hauls himself back up to his feet, and swings his bag over his shoulder. J.T. doesn't watch as he begins to walk down the driveway. (He can't watch another person leave.)

(He doesn't want his last memory of David to be of him leaving.)

... *** ...

"No. Daddy." Sarah says as she wrestles her way out of J.T.'s grip and runs to the window of J.T.'s room to look down the drive. "Daddy."

J.T. aches to pick her up, to hold her, to tell her everything will be alright. "Hey little Care Bear," J.T. manages to choke out instead, his hands absently picking up the plush sehlat Sarah seemed to tote around everywhere, "how about we go grab some puffs? You want some puffs Care Bear?"

(David was supposed to come back yesterday.)

... *** ...

Miss Mellony catches him outside of David's room, his hand on the door. Sarah had refused to go down in his room and J.T. needed to go outside and scream. He needed to go outside and run and run and run and....

God, is this what his mother had felt?

Is this the feeling Sam had gotten every time he had looked at J.T.?

(He thinks he understands now.)

Miss Mellony's cheeks are pale and her wrists are bird bone thin, the bangles that used to clack and jangle on her wrists are long gone. J.T. doesn't have much to do with the woman. Aside from a weekly schedule and her daily appearance at dinner, J.T. hardly ever sees her. He thinks that suits them just fine. J.T. doesn't need much of a minder.

She looks down at him and for the first time, J.T. wonders what she sees. He's still in his ripped up jacket and he has the stupid Fair Harvest shirt on. Frank had liked to tell him that

he looked like a garden gnome, too big hands and a body too quick for his brain. (In the back of his mind, something hisses that David had liked him. David had let him stay with Sarah. There *had* to be some trust there at the very least.)

Miss Mellony gives him a soft smile. "I need to go to town." She says but J.T. can barely hear her over the rush of blood in his ears and the claws tearing long thin strips of flesh out of the middle of his back. "David was supposed to come back two days ago and besides, I need to check in to get our next ration box."

The world tilts a bit under J.T.'s feet. His shoulder hits the wall and suddenly, he wonders if he had known that his door had four gouges just above the door handle. His shoulders are hovering at the bottom of his ears and for all that he is wrapped up in his jacket, the hallway seems far too cold for the season.

"David isn't coming back." J.T. says blankly, his gaze caught on the door handle of his room. Sarah had put a small gold star just above the lock. "You and I both know David isn't coming back."

(His last memory isn't of David walking down the driveway, but somehow, J.T. thinks the sadness covering David's face when J.T. had turned away isn't much better.)

It is the truth. David isn't coming back. It is a fact, just like how J.T. is the Kelvin Baby, Frank is an asshole, and Sarah is adorable.

David isn't coming back.

(There is a hole in J.T.'s chest where his heart used to sit.)

Maybe it is more telling that Miss Mellony doesn't argue. They both know David would never leave Sarah. He would never leave his little angel. (Maybe, just maybe, if J.T. was *good*, David wouldn't leave him behind either.)

Miss Mellony gives him one last smile and J.T. can't help but watch as she turns and goes back down the stairs. He hadn't watched David leave. (He will always regret that.) But Miss Mellony? The whole situation is like watching a train wreck. Miss Mellony is leaving and J.T. knows she will not be coming back.

J.T. all but collapses onto the top step, his chin sinking down to rest upon his knees. In his throat, a scream begins to build.

They're dead.

They're all dead.

(They've left him behind.)

The front door slams shut with an air of finality and J.T.'s shoulders begin to shake.

...***...

J.T. sits at his desk and watches as Sarah sleeps. She has an arm wrapped around the doll he gave her and the sehlat. In his bed, Sarah is dwarfed by the pillows and the blankets. Her pointed ears poke sharply through her curtain of hair and J.T.'s fingers are already twitching to pull apart the inevitable knots in her hair.

Miss Mellony hasn't even been gone for a full twenty-four hours and already J.T. is falling apart at the seams.

(He wants David.)

J.T. has always had a body too quick for his brain but for the first time, J.T. forces himself to sit at his desk and actually *think*. He's always been good at gathering up the pieces of the puzzles around him. He's always been good at carefully cultivating the knowledge and skills needed to force his way through the next obstacle. But this isn't something he can beat into submission.

Whatever is going on, J.T. needs to figure it out, and quickly.

Sarah shifts in her sleep and the doll drops out of her grasp. J.T. is all but vibrating out of his skin, his leg bouncing as he tries to force his brain into carding through every single memory he has of Tarsus IV.

He keeps getting stuck on David's face.

He can't do this.

J.T. grabs the doll and pulls it close, just to give his hands something to do. In Iowa, he had little toy cars and boxes of empty beer bottles to sort through. On Tarsus, he's been braiding and twisting wheat together as he ferries messages across the fields. With the mold, he can't even do that now.

His fingers pick over the doll and maybe it's because everything is falling apart, but he doesn't remember the doll looking so *vulcan* when he had given it to Sarah. To be fair, he had been rather focused on other things at the time, but he thinks he would have remembered picking up a vulcan doll, if only because he would have immediately shown David. There isn't much point in making a vulcan doll, after all. They aren't generally known for being *cuddly*.

The doll isn't terribly large, maybe eight inches at most. Two black buttons sit in a pale face and now that J.T. is looking, he wonders why the doll looks so much like *Sarah*. The thing has on a pale blue dress that looks so much like Sarah's usual romper it's almost scary.

"I don't know what to do." J.T. admits to the doll, his shoulders slumping as he drops his head into his hands, the doll half flopping on top of his head at the movement. "I don't know what I'm doing."

His eyes slid shut and he bites at his bottom lip. "I don't know what I'm doing. How am I supposed to take care of a vulc...." J.T. trails off as a thought crawls into the center of his brain and gives life to a small spark of hope.

Vulcan.

Sarah is half vulcan.

And vulcans are touch telepaths with mental bonds.

The pieces J.T. has been turning over in his mind, snap together and paint a picture J.T. doesn't dare begin to believe in. Aside from missing her father, Sarah hasn't been acting oddly. If David were dead, Sarah would know. At her age, she would have felt the parental bond break as a physical backlash.

On the bed, Sarah sleeps peacefully.

...***...

Later that night, J.T. is still debating if he should risk going out and collecting his kids. He had made them make those boxes and he knew some of the families had begun to batten down the hatches. If he were smart, he'd leave the kids where they were safer.

He'd leave them with their families.

(Sixty-three people don't just disappear.)

Sarah curls up in his arms and J.T. decides that he has to at least go get Tommy. Tommy has babysat some of the others before, so at least J.T. can leave Sarah with him for a day as he goes into town.

He won't be gone forever.

(He won't be like Sam.)

J.T. never even makes it to the front door. In his arms, Sarah arches and begins to *scream*.

(In the back of his mind, something *clicks* into place.)

A Pack Begins to Form

Chapter Notes

Hey all!

For those of you who got all excited and thought this was a Hobbit chapter, I'm sorry. I'm still working on that one. Exams and the end of term snuck up on me and it seems that was the ball that got dropped. But anyway, we're still moving forward in this fic and, if you've read other T4 fics before, then you know what comes after this chapter. As always, I hope you enjoy, had fun, and please, please, don't shoot me.

-Lost

Morning finds J.T. and Sarah on the floor in the kitchen. Neither have slept. J.T. is shaking. Sarah is *crying*. He needs to get up. He needs to get up and *move*. David is...

David is...

David isn't coming back.

Sarah is all but asleep on his shoulder and J.T. is rocking her as he whispers nonsense into her hair. His shirt is soaked through and if he were a bit more coherent, he'd be cringing away from the kid spit on his neck.

J.T. isn't a soft child. He grew up under Frank's fist and the weight of the fleet's disappointment. If Frank, Winnoa, and Sam couldn't break him, David won't either. His brain is already spinning a mile a minute, drafting up ideas and tossing out plans as fast as he can make them.

It's like Iowa all over again.

There's nowhere to run.

The thing about Tarsus IV, J.T. thinks in a sudden burst of clarity, is that there was no prison. Fair Harvest was the closest thing to a prison Tarsus IV had.

(Sixty-three people don't just disappear.)

J.T. has all the puzzle pieces. He has all the data he mined from the networks all those weeks ago and he has the imagination to fill in the rest. But, he doesn't know what to do. If he were by himself, he could just take off. He'd take his things, cut his losses, and go scurrying up into the mountains. But he isn't alone and he won't leave Sarah. He can't leave Sarah.

But he can't do this alone.

He needs help.

He needs to go to Tommy. Tommy is old enough to babysit and David had always liked the other boy. J.T. just needs to get to Tommy. Besides, Tommy was going to be with his mum and dad and J.T. could tell them that David had...

(J.T. doesn't like adults, but he likes (liked) David even more than he hates everyone else. For him, for Sarah, he'll get on his knees and beg. For them, he'll ask for help.)

He'll have to tell Tommy's mum and dad that... that David and Miss Mellony weren't coming back.

He needs to get to Tommy.

J.T.'s arms are almost dead under Sarah's weight. (She might only be sixteen months old, but she is half vulcan and like most vulcans, her body is dense.) He can barely see straight. His feet ache at the thought of moving, and J.T. almost wonders if he has somehow fused into place on the kitchen floor.

David isn't coming back.

J.T. shoves the thought out of his mind and drags himself up to his feet. He has made his decision. Now, he just needs to act on it.

(If J.T. were any less tired and Sarah were any less clingy, he would have thought about grabbing her bag at the very least. But J.T. is tired and the thought slips his mind.)

Once again, J.T. begins the process of leaving. He can see the echo of his body on the floor and hear the phantom wails Sarah had wept through all night long. But, J.T. has always been haunted by ghosts and these two are no different.

J.T. opens the door.

It is two kilometers to the east to Tommy's homestead. He can do this. He can do this. He can...

The door swings open and catches the wall with a solid thump. The whole time J.T. had been on Tarsus IV, Miss Mellony had been after him to stop throwing the door open. By this point, there was a soft indent in the wall from where the door handle crashed through the plaster. The noise of the door handle shouldn't make his breath catch in his throat or make his hands clamp onto Sarah's back in sudden all encompassing guilt. This wasn't his fault.

This wasn't his fault.

(Maybe if he had just *said* something, none of this wouldn't have happened. Maybe if he hadn't crashed that car off that cliff, then this planet would have been spared. Maybe Frank was right. J.T. brought bad luck wherever he went.)

The door bumps into the wall again, and this time, J.T. hears the little choked off *hiss* that the fist bang had covered. For the past few months, J.T. has been helping in the after school

programs and dodging through fields with some of the older messengers. At this point, there is no way he can mistake the sound of a sob for anything else.

J.T. turns to look down the porch. His heart in his throat and there is something J.T. thinks might be *fear* curling talons around his neck. (He already knows what he is going to see, but he can pray and hope until there is nothing left but reality and crumbling faith.)

He doesn't want to be proven right. Not today.

Fair Harvest was a traditional old American style farmhouse. The porch was more suited to hosting rocking chairs and end tables rather than desks and sign up sheets, but J.T. supposed Miss Mellony had had to work with what she had been given. Fair Harvest was supposed to be a place of new beginnings and fair treatment. (He doesn't think anyone could have planned for Tarsus IV, not really.)

Fair Harvest was supposed to be a place of *hope*.

(J.T. has never wanted to curl up and cry as much as he does right now.)

At the end of the porch, Tommy sits huddled into a ball, little Kevin curled up at his feet like a cat. The two of them are wedged beside the deck box and pressed as close to the wall as they could get. From experience, J.T. knows no one would be able to see them if they were walking up the driveway and they're both small enough that J.T. has to strain to see them in the light of the soft dawn.

He hears that soft choked off sob again.

The fear in his throat clasps tight. Kids on Tarsus IV don't cry. There really isn't any reason to. (Well, at least, there hadn't been a reason to cry until recently.) If you were on a crew or a messenger like J.T., then you got up at dawn and walked until your feet bled and your shoulders ached under the weight of your pack. If you were like Tommy, the son of a landowner, then you worked just as hard and played just that much harder.

Kids on Tarsus IV didn't cry simply because there wasn't any *time*. Daylight hours were for the fields, chores, and a few hours of school. Darkness was meant for sleep and homework. It wasn't about contentment as much as Tarsus IV had managed to provide a reliable kind of stability.

But Tommy was *crying*.

There was something about the scene that struck J.T. as absurdly funny. Back in Iowa, the neighbors had had a great big old mutt. The thing was too stupid to herd and too gentle to guard and for some godforsaken reason, it had decided that it liked J.T.

That dog had hauled itself up on failing hips and cut across the fields every few days. Inevitably, the mutt would end up huddled on the corner of J.T. 's porch, or as what seemed more likely, half stuck underneath it. Frank had hated the thing. He had yelled, thrown bottles towards the mutt, and even threatened to shoot the 'raggedy bastard'. J.T., out of spite more than anything else, had taken to leashing the thing and giving it a squeaky toy whenever

Frank had gone into the den to watch whatever game was on that night. The mutt had the awesome ability to squeak the ball at *just* the right pitch to stab spikes into one's ears and completely cover up the sound of the game. (Oddly enough, the mutt had never taken to squeaking the ball during the commercials or breaks.)

Every time the mutt appeared on the porch, its ears were pinned back against its skull and J.T. would swear up and down the thing was near tears. The sight was pathetic to the point of amusement. Those memories of the mutt on the porch had the same effect as Tommy curled up with Kevin. Only this scene didn't make him roll his eyes in fondness and click his fingers together to bring the mutt closer for pets and squeaky toys. This scene made him want to be anywhere else, even if it meant being locked away under Frank's roof.

"J.T.?" Tommy said with something J.T. thought might be wonder. "J.T.!"

J.T. can't help but watch as the boy tries to scramble up to his feet, Kevin's little hand clasped firmly under white knuckles. It is an exercise in futility. Tommy has only just come out of a growth spurt and he had been banned for weeks from using anything that wasn't plastic or replaceable. The poor boy can barely manage to drag himself upright without help, let alone doing so while holding onto Kevin.

J.T. doesn't dare move to help. He's got Sarah in his arms and his stomach has dropped out somewhere near his feet. (He can't *do this*.)

Sarah grumbles a bit and twists in his hold, her nose nudging the underside of his jaw like a cat. The dull ache that he hadn't realized was throbbing in his temples, recedes just enough for J.T. to finally figure out how to shift Sarah so that he can extract one hand and wave Tommy back down to sit on the porch.

Any other time, J.T. would be concerned that Kevin was just being dragged around like a rag doll. The toddler was usually louder and much more rambunctious. (J.T. pointedly ignores the glazed eyes and the trembling lips. *He can't do this*.)

Even while sitting, Tommy's eyes are wide and rimmed with red. It is almost as if the boy can't believe J.T. was real. Like he had expected J.T. to be gone like Miss Mellony and David.

J.T. doesn't want to think about it. He doesn't want to think about the fact that David might have been...

If J.T. had *known*, then he wouldn't have left David to the mercies of the Townies.

J.T.'s breath *hitches*.

Tommy isn't half slumped over like Kevin was. Instead, the boy has cheeks that are shiny with tear tracks. But, he's also got square shoulders and anger in his eyes that battles with grief and J.T. has a moment of utter viciousness.

Good. J.T. thinks with a small sneer he is oh so careful to keep off his face. Let this be somebody else's problem.

(*He can't do this.*)

"J.T.?" Kevin manages to spit out. It's not the clearest pronunciation of J.T.'s name that he has ever heard, more of a slurred Jee-tee than anything else. But, Kevin still gets his point across. If Tommy had been filled with awe, then Kevin was a mix of relief and the surety in the knowledge that J.T. is a trusted 'adult'.

And, as if Kevin's small shout was a bugle call, Tommy just *crumples*. And suddenly, it all comes crashing down on top of J.T.'s head. The boy is eleven. Eleven.

Kevin is only five.

J.T. is thirteen.

The only reason J.T. doesn't find himself on his knees is because Sarah was in his arms and he'll be damned before he let's her go.

"Mum and Dad went to town two days ago." Tommy says, his eyes wide and his breath stuttering. "They had left a note, said they had gone to pick up the rations boxes. They left me to sleep because I had stayed up all night helping Dad lay out the frames for the hothouse."

J.T. closes his eyes.

He can't do this. He can't do *this*.

"And Kevin?" J.T. asks, his blood already cold in his veins. "What about him?"

"I found Kev wandering in the fields. I don't know where he came from, but I figured his aunt could call his mum?"

J.T. doesn't have to open his eyes to know that Tommy is looking past J.T. into the kitchen, hoping to catch a glimpse of the woman.

What is he supposed to do?

(Part of him wants to sink down and scream and scream and scream...)

He nods his head towards the kitchen. "Inside." He orders, the hole in his gut widening when Tommy and Kevin all but throw themselves in through the doorway. He doesn't know what to do.

He doesn't know what to do.

(*"Sometimes," David says ever so softly, one hand carding over Sarah's pointed ears, "you just have to take everything one step at a time."*)

"We're gonna be alright, right?" Tommy whispers when J.T. finally manages to make it into the kitchen. "We're gonna be ok?"

There isn't much J.T. can say, not really. He doesn't like to lie, not to the kids. He's had enough cold lies thrown in his face to last a lifetime to even think about doing it to someone else, let alone the kids. Instead, J.T. works on detaching Sarah. It's a bit of a struggle to put Sarah down, but he manages it. The kitchen floor isn't the most comfortable thing in the universe, but Sarah is at the age where when she is exhausted, anything is a reasonable napping place.

"We're gonna make it work." J.T. eventually settles on, his arms numb without Sarah's steady weight. He doesn't expect Tommy to buy the line, but Tommy only responds with a slight nod and eyes that seem to sink down for miles.

It is Kevin that responds badly. At five years old, he's too young to read but just the right age to poke around and find anything and everything not strapped down. Miss Mellony used to despair over her nephew ever learning how to keep his fingers to himself, but J.T. had also seen the slight smirk she had carried around whenever the boy was over. She was the least likely person to ever tell the boy no. And Kevin, long used to being able to wrap his aunt around his fingers, is the one who starts to cry.

"Are the bad guys gonna take Auntie Mells away like they did Mummy and Daddy?" Kevin asks between hiccuping breaths and chattering teeth.

There is a soft ringing in J.T.'s ears and his blood runs so cold, he wonders if he is ever going to be able to be warm again. The moment is frozen, cold and harsh like the Iowa winters. Echoes of Frank's footsteps creak down J.T.'s spine and he fights the urge to look over his shoulder. But Kevin doesn't look away and J.T. can only take so much.

Dropping down to look Kevin in the eye makes the frost in his joints crack. He's got ice in his veins and glaciers in his heart, but he needs to do this. (He needs to know.)

"The bad guys?" J.T. whispers. His heart beats a steady thump even while every nerve in his body stands up and howls. Kevin has been watching old videos for months. His favorite game was to chase around his classmates and to tag team invisible 'bad guys'. But, for some reason, J.T. doesn't think Kevin's imaginary bad guys were the reason Tommy found the kid wandering in the fields.

(Sixty-three people don't just disappear.)

"Bad guys." Kevin whimpers, his hands coming up over his head like claws. "They had phasers and were really really mean! Mummy made me hide in the closet."

J.T. meets Tommy's gaze over the table and he doesn't know what expression is on his face, but he thinks it might just match the pale cheeks and the wide eyes that are slapped across Tommy's face.

Sixty-three people don't just disappear.

And the Rileys would never leave Kevin alone to wander the fields.

"J.T.?" Kevin gasps, his eyes huge in his face. "J.T., where's Auntie Mells?"

Everything falls to pieces; Tommy's parents are missing, the Rileys were taken away by 'bad guys,' and David is...

J.T. can't move. Kevin is staring at him with great big eyes and a quivering lip and the shame and the anger that haunts J.T.'s blood boils under the weight of the glaciers in his ribs. It's always just been him. Sam left. Frank didn't care. Even the damn dog wasn't his.

He can't just run away.

He can't just pick up his bag and run for the hills.

He won't (can't) leave Sarah and he certainly can't leave Tommy or Kevin behind. Not now. Not ever.

"J.T...." Tommy breaks in, his voice trailing off in a way J.T. is beginning to associate with bad news and terrible luck.

"What's up?" J.T. forces himself to look away from Kevin, even if it's one of the hardest things he's ever done. (That doesn't mean that J.T. doesn't sneak a hand forward and curl his fingers into Kevin's little hand. That doesn't mean that J.T. doesn't tug the boy close and wish that he could hug away all of the boy's fears.)

Tommy holds up a piece of paper. "Mum had one just like this." He says, his eyes wide and wild.

The paper hits the table and over Kevin's head, J.T. looks down to see the crest of Tarsus IV. He still has the glaciers in his blood and the frost on his skin, and he looks at the paper to see two names. Miss Mellony and his own.

He can't read it, not really. His brain is jumping off the walls and there is something in the back of his head that *screams* with every beat of his heart. He's got enough pieces to know that this letter is a summons and he knows, just like how he knows this whole thing is *his fault*, that Miss Mellony had never planned on telling him anything.

"J.T. This is for both of you." Tommy presses onwards, his eyes wide. His hands begin to shake and J.T. can barely lift his head from the soft curl of Kevin's hair to see Tommy frown at him. "What are you going to do?"

With the sort of luck J.T. has been having recently, he half expects the paper to burn through the table and smolder like the devil's note it is. The fact that it just sits there is almost worse. Sarah is asleep on the floor, Kevin is curled into his arms, Tommy hasn't moved, and J.T. doesn't know what to do.

He can't leave them.

He won't leave them.

He...

J.T. shifts in his chair. He's got a body too quick for his brain, but this matters. This is important. (This was the most important thing he would ever do in his life.)

"I'm going to go find your Aunt Mells." J.T. says slowly, his brain whorling and his heart stuttering in his chest. If he doesn't go, then someone from town will come and find them. If he doesn't go, then the men who had gone to close up Jin's homestead will march on Fair Harvest and they'll take Kevin. They'll take Tommy.

They'll take Sarah.

He can't let that happen.

"I'm going to find your Aunt Mells," J.T. repeats, his hands finally steadying as a plan comes to him in increments, "And you three are going to stay here."

Kevin near collapses against his chest and over the boy's head, Tommy meets his gaze. J.T. doesn't know what his face looked like, but it must have been something awful, because Tommy gives a full body shiver.

"What about," Tommy starts, his gaze cutting over to Sarah. J.T. follows his gaze, it is impossible to miss that her eyes are still flushed green and her lips are chapped. Sarah, already pale on a good day, looked like a ghoul given human form curled up on the floor. "What about David?"

"Yeah," J.T. whispers after a long moment of battling with the boulder in his throat, "yeah, I'll find David too."

Something in his chest *screams* at the lie. But, if he says anything, Tommy's going to demand to come with him, and J.T. can't. He can't. He needs Tommy to stay with Sarah and Kevin. He needs them to be safe.

"If anyone comes by," J.T. says as he slowly detangles Kevin from his chest and drops him in Tommy's arms, "then you go out the back and up into the hills. You go to that bolthole I showed you a few months back."

It's not a perfect plan, and from the expression on Tommy's face, he knows it too. But they don't have a choice. He won't bring the kids into whatever hell has descended into the town and J.T. knows he's faster on his own.

It takes effort to walk out the front door and not look back. Every step he takes makes him want to turn back and gather up Sarah and others and just bolt into the hills. (There's an itch in his brain and a tumble of nerves skittering down his back. Panic hooks into his stomach and it is only pure spite and *fear* that drives him forward.)

Tommy is smart enough to grab J.T.'s go bag if things did go wrong. J.T. doesn't dare bring his pack with him into town. He'll be damned before he gives those bastards, those killers, anymore resources. He'll be damned if he let's anyone like *Frank*, all fists and anger, win.

J.T takes the back trails into town, stepping off the beaten path the moment Fair Harvest is just a haze in the distance. He knows better than to think that the main roads won't be watched. Just like he's not stupid enough to think that the trails he takes aren't watched, but the likelihood is that there might be *less* people watching this one. Besides, J.T. is still technically a messenger, for him not to take the shortcuts would be suspicious.

Still, he takes the back paths not just because he is expected too, but because he *needs to*. He knows what's going on in town. Or rather, he knows enough. His imagination can fill in the rest. But he's only thirteen, no matter how much he rages and bares his teeth against the injustice of this whole stupid system. He's thirteen. He's *too young* to know anything. Or at least, that's what everyone else seems to think.

(He wasn't too young to drive a car off a cliff. He wasn't too damn young to send off world alone. He wasn't too young to be left behind when everyone else shot off into the Black. He wasn't too young to be left behind while his temporary Guardian went off *to die*.)

He can't let this anger show on his face. Not yet. Not when the people who will recognize him in town know his small grins better than his general scowls. J.T. is known as a moody kid, but Miss Mellony hadn't allowed him into town until he had learned 'manners'.

(Like manners had ever saved anyone.)

It's hard, pretending, that is. He's got old anger growling in his stomach and old hurts welling up under his skin. At the back of his mind, there is a hole, a patch of jagged pain and restlessness that he can't seem to shove away. But still, he keeps that wry grin in the corner of his lips.

He can pull off being worried, what with David and Miss Mellony 'missing', but angry? No. That would raise too many flags. Especially when he doesn't think he'd be able to keep that anger under wraps the moment he saw, well...

Everyone lies, J.T. thinks. Everyone always lies. Tarsus IV was supposed to be *safe*.

(Sixty-three people don't just disappear.)

Town rises up on the horizon and J.T. pauses in the middle of the path. White mold is dusted over the ground and dust spins through the air like a bad bout of spring cleaning.

This is it, he thinks, this is where he finds out what is going on.

The Town Isn't Burning

Chapter Notes

Hi everybody,

I know, I know. I'm late. Well, I'm sorry to say that's going to be the new norm for a little while. Between the two jobs and school, I'm working super long days. But, either way, I finally managed to get this chapter done and edited, so you all get a nice new shiny chapter to play with.

Yay!

Anyway, as always, have fun, enjoy, and please don't shoot me!

-Lost

For all the nerves in J.T.'s stomach and the horrifying images his brain had been flashing behind his eyes for the past few hours, he had never thought about the fact that town might look *exactly the same*. There was no smoke, no guards marching two by two like in old holos, or even the odd person darting from alley to alley. Walking into town, J.T. almost wondered if maybe, just maybe, he had been a touch too paranoid.

No one was walking too quickly. There were no quick glances or silent messages sent back and forth through desperate expressions.

There was nothing like that at all.

A few kids J.T. knew by sight, but not by name, went hurtling through the crowd with a soccer ball. They ran laughing through the open street, easily shrieking and hollering encouragement to each other. Down by the bakery, Mr. Simmons, one of the town clerks, shouted something as the ball went sailing by his head. The man's fist shook in the air as he scowled at the children.

The whole thing was surreal and J.T. couldn't help but look over his shoulder towards the messenger trails. This, this...

None of this made any sense.

(Sixty-three people didn't just disappear.)

Kevin's parents wouldn't leave him behind. Tommy should have at least gotten a comm from his dad if his parents had to stay in town overnight. Miss Mellony would never have had J.T. violate his parole by ignoring a direct summons from the Governor himself. Yet, J.T. had been expecting to see shuttered windows and smoking ruins. He had been expecting to see farm equipment being stripped for parts and smelted for patch jobs on the hot houses. He had expected to see the *fear*.

He had expected to see grief, sorrow, pain...

Anger.

The soccer ball rolled to a stop at his feet and drew J.T. back to the present with a dull thump against his foot. The last time J.T. had seen a soccer ball, Miss Mellony had been shouting at the kids not to touch it. The ball had rolled into a patch of mold and no one had wanted to risk bringing the mold into the fields via their clothes or shoes. The ball had been left to rot at the back part of Fair Harvest.

As far as J.T. was aware, it was still there.

Reflexively, J.T. rolled his foot around the ball to get it in a better position before he booted it back towards one of the boys. A little girl in pigtails gave a loud groan as the ball was kicked towards an impromptu goal post.

J.T. stood frozen in the street. When was the last time he laughed like those kids? When was the last time he had seen anyone who didn't look halfway to *gaunt* ? J.T. was confused and overwhelmed. He needed to move, to step forward, run and figure out what was going on. He needed to do *something* .

(J.T. wanted to go *home*.)

"J.T.! Over here!"

J.T. nearly tripped as his head shot up and turned towards the bakery. Richie, one of the messengers J.T. had worked with for about a week back when he was settling into a crew, was waving just outside. He had a grin stretched over his face and his free hand was half hidden behind his back, held hostage by one of his kid cousins.

J.T. didn't hang out with a lot of people close to his own age. Anyone who was able to work without supervision was sent to the farms and if J.T. hadn't been at Fair Harvest for a vehicle related incident, he might have spent more time with the teenagers of Tarsus IV. But, as it was, J.T. wasn't allowed near anything with wheels.

Richie was fifteen years old and a self proclaimed terrible driver. (Three broken bumpers and a severed drive shaft spoke volumes for the truth of that statement.) He worked the messenger crews with J.T. and the preteens. J.T. didn't get teamed up with the older boy too often, but there was a certain comradeship in being the oldest kids in the crews.

The world might be turned on its head and spitting out twisted riddles, but J.T. welcomed a familiar face. (Richie wasn't an adult and J.T. knew that, but he couldn't help but relax at the sight of someone old enough to take on the burden weighing down J.T.'s shoulders.)

"Heya kid." Richie said with a grin and a head tilt towards his cousin. "You've met Jacob, Annie, and Danny, right?"

For a moment, J.T. could only blink in confusion. He was tired, hungry, and thirsty, but he could have sworn that only Jacob was holding Richie's hand. The little boy stared up at him

and slowly gave a little wave before turning his head into Richie's waistband.

Bemused, J.T. waved back.

Richie paused, looked down, rolled his eyes, and let loose a sharp whistle. From behind the bakery, two kids rolled out in a flurry of hands, ribbons, and shouts.

Really, J.T. should have known. The three siblings were at Fair Harvest five nights a week and the twins fought like cats and dogs the entire time. By this point, J.T. was of the opinion it was simply how the two of them showed affection.

"Give that back Danny!" Little Annie shouted, her foot coming down in a stomp as her Sunday best clung to her legs like a second skin. Dust, white fuzz, and dirt was swiped liberally from head to toe. Danny, her twin brother, held her ribbon twirler over his head and made a face.

"I got it first, Annie!" He shot back as he danced out of her reach, the twirler flicking in and out of her grasp like a taunt.

"But it's mine!" She shouted as she picked up a clot of dirt and heaved it towards her brother.

"Not anymore!" Danny shrieked with laughter.

J.T. blinked again.

They were...

They were laughing.

The town wasn't burning.

Everyone was...

Everyone was ok?

"You here for the speech?" Richie asked, effectively pushing aside J.T.'s thoughts.

J.T. blinked. Speech? What speech? Slowly, J.T. looked back to the street, eyes widening as he realized most of the people were dressed up in their Sunday best. Skirts and suits starched within an inch of their lives and shoes shined until the sun reflected off them like the tractor yield signs.

"Today was the ration pick up for my sector." J.T. said quietly, his shoulders twitching under the sensation of dozens of judgemental gazes. He was probably the only person in town who was wearing work clothes. Aside from the twins, he was probably the only person in town who desperately needed a good scrub and a wash down.

(There was something wrong. There was something *wrong*. There was a throbbing in his temples and a band around his heart that tensed with every breath he tried heaved in.)

(There was something wrong.)

Out of the corner of his eye, J.T. watched as Mr. Simmons was handed a loaf of bread from the bakery. J.T. froze as his lungs dropped down to his feet and the nerves in his stomach turning to angry glass shards.

The bakery had been closed to the public since the mold had crawled into the supplies in town. Once the white fluff had begun to dust the window boxes of the outer district and Governors' Ridge, the ration boxes had been distributed based on the number of individuals in a house, age, health status, and enough other factors that the paperwork had made J.T.'s head spin just watching Miss Mellony shift through it all.

The creation of the ration boxes had meant the shut down of the bakery and the grocer. Apparently the town square and parts of the Ridge had replicators, but J.T. honestly hadn't spent enough time in either to know if that rumour was true or not. What he did know for sure was that the bakery had been shut down just after he had come to town to try and return the doll. Miss Mellony had complained about the shut down for *days*.

So, if the bakery was supposed to be closed, then why was J.T. seeing produce handed from the front door as if they weren't in the middle of a food shortage?

His stomach growled.

In the part of his mind that wasn't completely panicked and overrun, J.T. had the presence to recognize the fact that he hadn't eaten since the day before. He knew Sarah had. He had forced her to swallow a cup of water and a plate full of crackers. The meal hadn't been enough for a growing little girl, but J.T. had been out of options. He had needed her to eat.

Richie seemed to actually see him for the first time and J.T. couldn't help but stare back. Once, they might have been able to pass for cousins. They both had fine blond hair and a cheeky little smile, but the dust of Tarsus had worn them both down. Some days, J.T. swore he had the grit of the field in his bones and the scent of work oil blended into his palms. He knew for sure that he had messages burned into the back of his eyelids and the straps of his pack indented into his shoulders. Tarsus had worn them both down, but it was only J.T. that bore the marks of the struggle the colony had been through.

"Have you been eating?" Richie asked, his eyes widening as he took a step back to take in J.T. from head to toe. "Stars and planets, J.T.! You look like Raf's scarecrow. Nothing but bones and worn clothes!"

The exhaustion tugged at J.T.'s tongue. "You know we're in the middle of a famine, right?" He asked crossly, his fingers twitching at his elbows as he folded into himself.

Richie paused, his jaw working for a moment as he gave J.T. another once over. Ever so slowly, his brow furrowed as he leaned forward and grabbed J.T.'s shoulder as if J.T. were one of his errant cousins. There was something reflective in Richie's gaze, something that warned J.T. that now was not the time to argue.

"Haven't you heard? They've found a pesticide for the mold." Richie said, his hand tightening on J.T.'s shoulder as if he were afraid J.T. would bolt.

J.T. blinked.

A pesticide?

But, J.T. thought a bit desperately, that wasn't possible. The mold had been resistant to everything that they had tried. The Governor had had to send for relief off world. (Hadh't he?)

"Who did?" J.T. croaked, his hands twisting into fists. If the solution *had* been found, then wouldn't someone claim responsibility? Whoever had done it would be considered a saviour of the colony. They would be hailed as a hero.

(Even now, J.T. didn't trust hope as far as he could throw it.)

(Sixty-three people didn't just disappear.)

Richie paused, his mouth opening and closing as he thought the question through. "That..." he said, his teeth worrying at his lip, "is a rather good question."

J.T. looked at the twins still fighting in the dirt, their laughter a stark contrast to the shards of glass gliding across the underside of his ribs.

Richie patted his shoulder. "The Governor should be saying something in his speech, if you want to come? Afterwards, we're all gonna stay for the celebration. You look like you could do with a good meal."

J.T. knew Richie meant the statement to be inviting, reassuring even. But there was an itch in the back of his brain and the instincts that had kept him one step ahead of Frank's fists were clamoring. Something was wrong.

Something was definitely wrong.

J.T. had left Fair Harvest without a plan, without any idea of what he was doing. He knew he needed to check in. He knew he needed to make sure that no one came to check on Fair Harvest.

(Here was the only plan J.T. had ever had. Keep himself away from Frank's notice and keep the kids safe from harm. The sad truth was that J.T. was expendable. He was the one who slipped between the cracks and had never been worth anything. What he was worth was keeping the other kids *safe*.)

Riche gave J.T. a strained smile and beckoned for him to follow. The twins scampered around them like excitable puppies but it was little Jacob who let go of his cousin's hand to slink back to walk beside J.T. Jacob's hand reached up to tangle with J.T.'s and J.T. couldn't help but grab on to the kid's thin hand. (Something in the back of his mind itched.)

Up ahead, the town square loomed over them, all imposing brick and mortar. J.T. had always hated the place. He had always hated how the town seemed to lazily spiral out from the center of the town square.

No matter how you looked at it, the town square seemed more like an old citadel in a fairytale than anything warm and welcoming to a blossoming colony. J.T. had only ever gotten the comparison after having to read *Sleeping Beauty* to Sarah. The little girl had been sitting sleepily in his lap and her tiny fingers had traced patterns onto the PADD, lazily following the illustration of roads leading up to a burning pile of spinning wheels in a castle courtyard. The town square wasn't quite the same, but J.T. couldn't help but draw conclusions.

The part of him that had spent sleepless mornings counting out credits and desperately trying to spread each one just that much further, stared at the walls that loomed overhead and sobbed. At least twelve feet high, the brick that made up the walls were imported from off world and had to have cost a fortune. To make matters worse, the walls were thick and doubled. Inside them were passages wide enough to walk through with a lookout perch roughly every fifty feet. To get into the town square, one had to pass through one of four double doored gates. J.T. had never seen them closed but he also knew they were an inch of solid steel.

The town square was a display of wealth and power, and J.T. didn't like it.

(Maybe it was because he had grown up under Frank's roof and Winnoa's casual disregard, but anywhere that didn't have an obvious or easy escape route made him nervous.)

"Johnathan!" Richie called out, his voice cutting through the shuffling of dozens of people heading into the square.

At the gate, one of the town guards looked up, a PADD in hand and a smirk in place.

(Something in the back of J.T.'s mind *whimpered*. They weren't safe. They weren't safe. They weren't...)

J.T. had only met Johnathan once. The man had to have been in his late thirties and was built as sturdy as the walls of the square. According to Miss Mellony, the man had been one of the first sign ups for the colony. J.T. believed it. Johnathan lived up on the hill, just outside of his messenger territory. Like the square, that part of the colony was walled. However, the gated community, Governors' Ridge, had a stylized wrought iron fence spanning all the way around the homesteads. Any message sent up to the Ridge had to be checked at the gatehouse.

No one went into the Ridge without an invitation.

(J.T. had only asked why the Ridge was a gated community once. Miss Mellony had gotten this pinched look on her face and ire flashed in her eyes. J.T. hadn't asked again.)

No one came down from the Ridge without cause.

"Richard, Daniel, Annette, and Jacob." Johnathan said quickly, his fingers flying over the PADD too quickly for J.T. to pick up a pattern.

Richie's hand gave J.T. a comforting squeeze. "And J.T. He's in my crew. I told him he could crash at mine tonight."

J.T. didn't look over at Richie in confusion, but it was a near thing. Johnathan simply shook his head and tapped his PADD a few more times.

"You here for your ration box with your guardian?" Johnathan asked, his smirk still in place. The guard was wearing a pair of mirrored sunglasses, and in the reflection, all J.T. could see was too thin cheeks and bitten lips.

"I thought there was a pesticide for the fields." Richie cut across; his eyes narrowing at Johnathan.

The guard didn't turn to look at Richie, instead, J.T. was pinned under the callous disregard of the tinted glasses and that ugly smirk. (Every inch of J.T.'s skin crawled. Everything in him shrieked to step back. To back away and leave this place.) "There is," Jonathan drawled, his fingers tapping away at the PADD again, "but the outer homesteads need additional help due to the distance they are from town."

Richie's shoulders lost some of the tension that he had been gathering since he had asked if J.T. had been eating. "Oh, yeah. I forgot." he said a bit sheepishly.

The scariest thing about this conversation, J.T. thought as he stared at his reflection twisted in front of him, was that Johnathan actually made a certain amount of sense. The outer fields did need more help, but it wasn't necessarily just in the distribution of food. Sixty-three people didn't just disappear.

Did no one think that the lead hands wouldn't realize their crews were no longer combing through the fields? Did no one think about the fact that the livestock and the machinery still needed to be maintained? Tarsus IV wasn't like Earth, there were no farms run entirely through drones and gps systems. Here, planters were still driven by people and livestock were still treated by human hands. There was no technological upkeep this far out into the colonies. That kind of support wouldn't come until the colonies could prove that the money needed to ship that sort of equipment was worth the yield and the continued well being of the colony. J.T. stared up at Jonathan and wondered if the guard knew anything about what life in the fields was like.

(He rather doubted it.)

Jonathan's fingers stilled on the PADD. "J.T.? You got another name? I ain't finding you on the list."

J.T.'s hands curled into fists. He hadn't used his birth name since his thirteenth birthday. Jimmy had died somewhere between engines and the darkness between stars. James had been nothing but a curse his good for nothing father had dropped on him moments before he had died a rather stupid death. The only one who called him James on this planet was Miss Mellony and even then he didn't like it. Still, he had to check in, didn't he? For Sarah and the others.

“James. James Kirk.” J.T. bit out, the name burning his tongue and clawing against his teeth. No one had ever had a problem with Sammy changing his name from George to Sam. So, why was it so different for J.T.?

Why did no one ever listen to him?

Jonathan tapped something on the screen. “James?” he asked, his eyebrows raising up above the frame of his glasses, his voice coloured in disbelief. “You’re James Kirk?”

It took a considerable amount of effort not to bar his teeth at the man.

Jonathan’s smirk grew. “You’re the Fair Harvest delinquent.”

J.T. was going to take his fist and he was going to *break* those stupid glasses and he wasn’t going to stop hitting until the damn smirk was off of the man’s face, guard or no.

As if he were making a show of it, Johnathan tapped the PADD one last time before gesturing through the town square gates. “Oh trust me James, you’re certainly on the list. Head on in, it’s almost time for the speech.”

Behind him, the crowd had been slowly shuffling in, faces lit up with relief and joy. Another guard had slipped over at some point during the conversation and the steady march of the people into the town square made J.T. want to scream.

Didn’t anybody see it?

Didn’t anybody hear it?

There was something wrong.

Richie gave Johnathan a smile before he walked through the gates without a look back. The twins darted after him, the ribbon fluttering out behind them like a banner. Just inside the gates, the kids from earlier who had been booting around a soccer ball, continued with their game.

Jacob’s grip tightened on J.T.’s hand.

J.T. looked over at Johnathan, his stomach twisted into knots and the itch in the back of his brain crawling forward towards his eyes by inches. (There was something wrong. There was something wrong. There was something...) In his reflection, J.T. could see gaunt cheeks and bright blue eyes.

His mother, when she had still pretended to care. When appearing for the yearly memorial and recruitment had been a priority, she had told J.T. that his eyes were nothing like his father’s had been. (Sam had once said they were nothing like their mother’s either.) It had been Frank that had explained where his eyes had come from, before the man had switched from exasperated words to swinging fists.

The radiation from the explosion, from his high risk birth in the middle of a massacre, had given him demon blue eyes. His mother had eyes the colour of a storm. His father had been

said to have the colour of the skies in the morning.

Sam had once said that J.T. had the eyes of the reckoning.

In Johnathan's glasses, all J.T. saw was exhaustion.

(Sixty-three people didn't just disappear.)

"There is something wrong." J.T. said, his gaze flicking between the town square and the now barren streets.

"There is no mistake." Jonathan said, that smirk twitching into something J.T. might call a true smile. "Why don't you head in and find out the truth for yourself?"

There really wasn't any other choice, J.T. realized as the other guard turned and stared at him through similar mirrored sunglasses. He had to walk into the town square. Each step seemed to rattle his bones and each breath echoed in his ears. At his side, Jacob kept pace. The little boy had yet to say a word and J.T. wasn't sure if he was grateful for the silence or not.

Idle chatter bounced through the town square and J.T. found himself drawing to a halt just past the gate. The sun beat down from above and while the whole place seemed to hum with the contentment of the citizens of Tarsus, J.T. couldn't help the sickly sense of dread from dropping onto his shoulders like a shroud.

Behind him, there was a creak.

Together, J.T. and Jacob turned to see Johnathan slowly closing the gates. Through the closing gap, J.T. watched as Johnathan lifted up a hand and gave a tiny wave.

Dutifully, Jacob waved back.

The gate clicked shut.

Everything Goes Up in Smoke

Chapter Notes

Hello all,

I finally have a chapter for you. Thank you to everyone who has been so patient and has decided to stick with me even through my wonky updating schedule. This chapter has some really dark themes and is pretty heavy, so please heed the warnings before going any further.

WARNINGS:

This is the Tarsus IV massacre so watch out for:

- death
- blood
- terror
- survivors-guilt
- mass graves
- smell of death
- shock

if you decide this is too much or not something you should be reading, skip to the end notes where there are SPOILERS and a summary. No graphic detail will be mentioned in the end notes.

As always, have fun, enjoy, and please don't shoot me!

-Lost

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The town square fell into silence when the final gate shut and J.T. couldn't help the gruesome little smile that snuck its way onto his face any more then he could help the hysterical laughter bubbling up in the bottom of his stomach. There was nothing he could do. The gates were shut. Every single one of them, and he was on the wrong side.

There was absolutely nothing he could do. He couldn't go pounding on the gates, screaming to be let out. He couldn't run away and hide. There wasn't even anyone he could go talk to or bug to find out what was really going on. Richie had said the Governor was supposed to give a speech about the end of the famine and the creation of a pesticide for the fields, but J.T. knew better. He had a letter on the kitchen table that said nothing about a peaceful resolution.

No, J.T. knew better than to think the famine was anywhere close to being finished.

(Sixty-three people didn't just disappear.)

The whole damn colony was built on lies, J.T. thought with a healthy dose of cynicism. The whole damn planet was made up of nothing but ash filled lies. And that last little smile Jonathan had sent him? That smile said that the guard knew about every single burnt out truth. Whatever was happening, whatever lie that was about to be shoved down J.T.'s throat, Jonathan knew all about it. Jonathan knew about it and the guard didn't *care*.

Overhead, the walls loomed and J.T. spared a moment to look up at the corner of the square. At his side, Jacob humed a little hiccuping tune, content to simply hang onto J.T.'s hand without a worry. J.T. swallowed roughly, his grip on Jacob's hand tightening ever so slightly as he ran an appraising eye over the walls that surrounded them.

There was one thing people tended to forget about those walls, J.T. thought with a shudder. The towers that were oh so evenly spaced, allowed someone to look out onto the town, just as easily as into the square.

Jacob stepped into J.T.'s shadow and J.T. tugged him along as he reached out for Annie as she went racing by. Where one twin went, the other would inevitably follow and J.T. was counting on that fact. Whatever was about to happen, was going to happen soon. Annie's shriek of surprise clamoured through the square when J.T. managed to snag his fingers into the back of her dress, but no one turned to look. J.T. was not surprised. Everyone was too hungry to really care about much these days.

Danny, still holding the twirler, skidded to a halt when he realized Annie was no longer following, and as he stood a fair distance away his face twisted into a pout. "Annie!" He shouted, one foot coming down in an errant stomp. "Come on! Don't you want *my* twirler?"

"Danny!" Annie shrieked in fury, twisting about in J.T.'s grip much like a spitting alley cat. "I'm gonna get you and I'm gonna pound you into the dust you absolute pest-nugget!"

On one hand, J.T. had to look at Annie for the interesting curse, on the other, he was a bit more concerned about trying to find Richie. He wasn't going to leave the other teenager alone, not right then. There were too many people and the walls kept looming overhead. Something was going to go wrong, and by the stars, J.T. wasn't going to let Richie get caught up in it.

"Annie!" Danny shouted again, the twirler flicking about over his head. "Annie, you're so slow!"

Annie twisted a bit more in J.T.'s grip and J.T. couldn't help the quiet hiss of pain when the girl threw herself forward, the beading of her dress ripping away in J.T.'s hand. With a sharp gasp, J.T. was forced to let go, the beads dropping out of the divots they had etched into his skin. Annie, no longer held back, stumbled a bit before she found her feet and bolted after her brother. Behind J.T., Jacob gave a huffing little snicker at his older sister's squeak of surprise.

J.T. didn't allow himself any time to think. With Jacob in tow he bolted after the twins, easily following the flicking ribbon and the taunts. Thankfully, the twins scampered around the edge of the crowd, somehow managing to stay out of the way from the mass of people milling around the center of the square.

Finally, J.T. managed to catch up with them on what felt like the complete otherside of the square. The twins, still bickering and rough housing, didn't seem to notice how J.T. practically hovered over them.

He had to find Richie.

He had to find Richie.

J.T. had to find...

A flash of Jonathan's smug little smile and the whisper of 'there is no mistake,' curled through the back of J.T.'s mind. Oh stars, he had to find Richie.

There was something wrong.

(Something in the back of his mind *itched*.)

J.T. looked up and past Danny, his gaze flicking through the crowd. What if he couldn't find him? What if J.T. was too late? He should have stayed back at Fair Harvest. But then he wouldn't have run into Richie and his cousins. (This was all his fault. It was always J.T.'s fault.)

He needed to find Richie.

Out of the corner of his eye, J.T. caught sight of Richie's blond hair and a wave of what might have been relief crashed down his spine. J.T. could do this. He could do this. But even J.T. wasn't stupid enough to think he could do everything by himself. He needed all the help he could get.

Slowly, J.T. waved his hand over his head as he tried to get Richie's attention, his mouth drying out at the thought of attempting to speak. Even with the square filled with the low murmur of hundreds over voices overlapping and bouncing off the walls, there was a tension that hovered in the air. It was the sort of foreboding that kept J.T.'s voice pinned under a lump in his throat and dull on the edge of his tongue.

There was something wrong.

Dread pooled in the bottom of his stomach and clawed at his ribs. Thankfully, Richie seemed to catch sight of J.T.'s frantic gesture. But, instead of marching over, the other boy waved back.

J.T. beckoned him closer, his hand shaking the longer Riche stared at him in puzzled bemusement. J.T. took a few steps backwards. The words he needed to spit out, stuck in his throat.

He took another step back. (There was nowhere to go.)

"Danny!" Annie shrieked again, her voice raising up over the crowd.

J.T. couldn't help but look, his gaze tearing away from Richie to look at the twins with his heart stopped in his chest and his blood frozen in his veins. The twins collided with a terrible yelp and rolled behind a row of benches that had been taken by some of the seniors of the colony. One of the older women turned and shook her head at the antics of the twins.

With a start, J.T. realized the twins were more than twenty feet away. J.T. didn't think when he scooped up Jacob and tore after them. The kids had to stay close. They had to stay close. He had to keep them close. They were *his*. They were his kids from the after school programs. They were the only things he had left. (May the stars bear witness, he wouldn't become *Sam*.)

Thank god Jacob was so docile.

Annie hit the dirt and rolled, somehow ending up in a tangle of limbs underneath the bench. Danny stuck out his tongue and twirled the ribbon with a quick flick of his wrist.

J.T. was almost close enough to snatch it out of the boy's grasp.

"Citizens." A voice boomed from the northern lookout tower.

The blood in J.T.'s veins froze. Once, and only once, had he heard that tone. It had been his seventh birthday and he still had the faint half-moon scars of his mother's fingernails on his wrist. (May the stars help him, there was something wrong.) J.T. couldn't help but look up, his eyes easily finding the balcony where the speaker stood. The man looked down at the crowded square and it took J.T. a moment to realize that the speaker was the Governor. That man, the one with dull brown hair and a jaw clenched hard enough to break teeth, was the fabled Governor of Tarsus IV.

J.T. had only met him once.

Kudos had come to Fair Harvest to congratulate Miss Mellony on her efforts to rehabilitate and cohabitate with so many people who needed 'second chances'. The man's speech had sounded rehearsed to J.T., but Miss Mellony had absolutely shone under the praise. That day had been the only time J.T. hadn't minded the smile logo on his shirt.

Fair Harvest had been Miss Mellony's dream and in that moment, J.T. could see it. He could see the dream in how David and Sarah played in the grass without worrying about a roof over their heads or blood purities. He could see it in the way his skin held no bruises and his veins echoed with contentment rather than anger.

(For the first time in his life, J.T. had seen *life*.)

In the present, Kudos looked down at the square with hollow cheeks and a gaunt sort of satisfaction in his face. In his hand, he held a padd. (The awful thing, J.T. will think much later, was that Kudos didn't even look down at it once.) Slowly, the man spread out his hands and sorrowfully shook his head. "The revolution is successful. But survival depends on drastic measures. Your continued existence represents a threat to the well-being of society. Your lives mean slow death to the more valued members of the colony. Therefore, I have no

alternative but to sentence you to death. Your execution is so ordered, signed Kodos, Governor of Tarsus IV."*

Oh . J.T. thought in the dumbstruck silence that followed. So this was how David died.

It was sick, the satisfaction that rolled in J.T.'s gut. But he had been right. There was something wrong. There was something dreadfully wrong. And now he had proof.

Whispers broke out in the crowd and it wasn't long before shouts began to bounce off the walls. J.T. stood frozen behind the benches, Jacob on his hip and Danny still trying to tease his sister, utterly oblivious to the whole situation.

At the edge of the crowd, Richie swung around and for the first time, J.T. recognized who was standing beside him. Miss Mellony followed the other messenger's gaze and J.T. watched as panic washed over her features. For a moment, the two of them simply stared at each other.

And then Miss Mellony reached out a hand with a shout.

Pandemonium broke out. Without a thought, J.T. pushed Danny and Jacob to the ground, shoving and prodding at them until they were fully under the benches. The twirler was forgotten in the dust.

Overhead, J.T. caught sight of a reflective glint from the towers.

It was hardly ever mentioned anymore, but the older generations of phasers had a distinct whine when they charged up. Like old revolvers, the phasers could only hold charge for six kill shots. After those shots were taken, the phasers were forced into a cool down cycle while the charge built back up for the next round. J.T. only knew about the cool down cycle because of one of his father's old textbooks he used to read up in the attic back in Iowa.

That hum filled the air now and it was as if J.T.'s head were on a string, the sense of horror in the air acting like a great puppet master.

The whine hit a fevered pitch.

J.T.'s head jerked up.

Miss Mellony hit the dirt with a thump that seemed so much louder than the rest of the chaos. And, like her fall had been the moment the universe was waiting for, the square was suddenly filled with the bright light of nearly a hundred phasers going off at once.

J.T. hit the ground and rolled under the benches, grabbing onto the twins and Jacob as the whine was broken up by the offbeat rounds shot down into the square.

Screams split through the air.

J.T. hauled the kids that much closer to him. There was nothing he could do. Jacob's hands curled tight enough to leave bruises on J.T.'s ribs and the twins held onto each other so tight,

J.T. could do nothing but wince in sympathy. The twins were only eight. Jacob was just barely seven. J.T. wasn't even fourteen yet.

The universe didn't care and the bodies hit the ground anyway.

They were going to die, J.T. realized in a sudden bolt of clarity. The four of them were going to die and 'there was no mistake'.

J.T. spared a moment to think of Sarah. To remember her green tinted little cheeks and her solemn little pouts that crossed her face whenever David hadn't been persuaded by her lisping speech for more treats. He spared a moment to wish he had never put the little girl down.

He spared a heartbeat to think of Tommy, to regret that he was leaving the boy all alone with two toddlers.

He spared a breath for little Kevin. A little boy who was too thin by half and too young to be wrapped up in all this mess.

His mind didn't offer images of Iowa. He didn't think of his mother or his brother. Frank never even crossed his mind. What he thought of instead was a ship with a crew that gave him a cup of ginger ale and a plate full of apple pie.

J.T. didn't have a lot of regrets. In all honesty, he had never had the time to regret anything. (He was only thirteen years old.) But, under those benches, with only the out of sync cool down cycles to mark the passage of time, J.T. drifted. He was hyper aware of the kids curled into his sides but his brain kept looping over the same image over and over.

A hand stretched out.

A face frozen in horror.

Blond hair spilled over the dust and the dirt.

(Was this what David saw forever and a lifetime ago? Was this what Sarah had felt when she had woken up screaming?)

(Stars above, had that only been last night?)

J.T. couldn't help but choke, his lungs spasming as he tried to push down the urge to scream. The grit of the ground dug into his cheek and a stone burrowed into his hip, but J.T. didn't dare move. He laid there, under that bench and between shuddering breaths, wondered if he'd ever be able to move again.

J.T. would forever be grateful that he and the kids are curled under the bench looking towards the wall. He didn't know if he would be able to lay there if he could see the panic in the square, rather than just hear it. He didn't know what he would do if he had been forced to look at Miss Mellony the whole time, rather than being able to turn his head to the side and simply *listen*.

It was bad enough that J.T. had to lay there under that bench and smell the massacre. Phasers, J.T. had read once upon a time, cauterized kill shots. Apparently the action was supposed to be merciful, a way to extend a person's life on the off-chance the super charged electric shot was not meant to be lethal.

What that meant for J.T. was that, while he couldn't see the massacre behind him, he could certainly hear and smell it. The screams he could almost tune out to a point, the same with the phasers. It didn't stop him from flinching from a particularly loud shriek, but it certainly kept him from bolting up to his feet. But the sounds weren't the worst of the situation. What was the worst was much simpler.

The smell.

J.T. was a farm boy. He had spent more time around grills and BBQs than he had an oven or a stove. During the summers, no matter how drunk Frank had been, it was a taboo to turn on the oven. With the old house too difficult to cool down efficiently, meals were either made cold or cooked outside on the deck. Hell, on the occasional weekend, Sam would swing an invitation for the two of them to head off to the cookouts and tailgate parties. (During the summer, it was easy to get access to food. It was the winter where things got difficult.)

J.T. had spent more time near a barbecue than an oven, so tucked away under those benches J.T. found himself curling forward just that much tighter around the three siblings. J.T. knew what fresh blood smelt like. He knew the cloyingly sweet smell of fresh blood and the tang of old blood. Thanks to Tarsus IV, J.T. also knew what the scent of cauterized flesh smelt like too.

(It smelled extraordinarily like dinner.)

J.T. tucked his head a bit further into Jacob's soft hair and tried his best not to think about how long it had been since he had eaten. (He tried not to think about how long it had been since he had eaten meat.)

The smell wouldn't go away.

J.T. clenched his jaw a bit tighter.

The image of a little boy's gap tooth grin burned behind J.T.'s eyes and dragged up a grief J.T. didn't have time to feel. (Or at least, that is what he told himself. He was stuck under a bench with three children and all the time left in the world.) He didn't have time to deal with this. Not with little Annie whimpering into her twin's shirt and Jacob trying to work his way inside J.T.'s ribcage.

Slowly, J.T. pushed all his grief, all his anger, into a little box tucked away at the back of his mind. He knew the emotions wouldn't stay there forever. They never had before. But he didn't have the time for them. He just needed to make it through this.

It was stupid, J.T. thought as he stared out unblinkingly at the wall. Dust and dirt were smeared across his cheeks and arms, and he was filthy enough Miss Mellony would...

Miss Mellony would...

J.T. dragged in a shuddering breath.

The whole damn thing was stupid. All he had done was drive a car off a cliff.

(This was all his fault. All of it.)

(Miss Mellony wouldn't be doing anything anymore.)

Overhead, the shots slowly become sporadic and with a start, J.T. realized the screams had been losing their fervor for a while.

How much time had he lost? What had he missed? They couldn't have been under the bench for long. They couldn't have been? Could they?

And then, almost all at once, the screams stopped altogether.

With the absence of the screams, the silence was almost deafening. In his ears, the silence rang with a fevered pitch. For a long moment, J.T. couldn't figure out what was worse. The sudden silence, or the whine of the phasers. His ears pricked up and the rocks that had dug into his bones almost seemed sharper as tension churned through his blood. In his arms, Jacob stopped squirming, the little boy stilling under J.T.'s hand as if he had been shot.

(Don't think like that. Don't think like that. His kids were fine. His kids were fine. His kids were fine. His kids were...)

The worst sound, J.T. decided after what seemed like a lifetime, was not the whine of the phasers, the screams, or the thumps. But the gasps. The worst sound was the gasps. (How many people were still alive? How many people were slowly dying out in the summer heat, with nothing but the glint of phasers and the looming walls overhead?)

It had probably been like shooting fish in a barrel, J.T. thought, the realization turning over and over in his mind. No one needed to have perfect or even good aim, not with the sheer volume of people that were in the square. It was rather simple really, all one had to do was point and shoot. The whole thing was probably easier than taking potshots off the back porch at squirrels. You didn't need to aim, after all. You were bound to hit *something*.

(Richie. Miss Mellony. David. The kid with the soccer ball. The gaggle of pipsqueaks that had been tag teaming in the streets.)

J.T. at heart, was a farm kid. A little boy who had grown up jumping from lofts and running down fields. He knew what had happened. They had been corralled. All the unsavoury and the unwanted. They had been led through a twisted path from their homes and welcomed into a slaughter house of a paddock.

How many had been culled?

How thin had Kudos made the herd?

Behind J.T., the town square was silent but for a few wheezing gasps and his own heartbeat screaming in his ears.

A gate squeaked open.

"...and I got fifty-four." Somebody shouted, their voice twinged with annoyance.

"And I still say I got sixty-seven." Johnathan shot back, that undercurrent of a sneer threading into his tone.

J.T. curled around Jacob a little tighter.

"Boys. Boys." A woman tsked, her voice heavy with *amusement*. "I got a hundred and seventeen."

"Yeah, well, you're disqualified because you have the upgraded model. Who did you even have to lay with to get that?"

Silence fell for a moment before a harsh *crack* split through the air.

"I don't think she liked that insinuation, George." Johnathan said with a quick chuckle.

"I got a breather." The woman snapped out, the whine of her phaser beginning to charge up for its duty cycle.

"Make it quick." Johnathan replied absently. "Tyler wants the whole square checked before the disposal crew comes through."

There was a shot.

"One-eighteen." The woman said tonelessly.

J.T. stuffed his knuckles into his mouth and did his best not to scream.

"There's another here." George called out, his phaser joining the steady thrum.

Two shots rang out. One directly after another.

J.T.'s free hand clamped onto Danny and Annie's intertwined fingers. Between his teeth, his knuckles began to bleed.

"Damn. I'll have to bring that up at the next meeting. There shouldn't have been any left." Johnathan grumbled. "Alright. You know the drill. Fan out. Cull any breathers. I don't want a repeat of a few days ago, you hear me? Oh, and if I find out any of you took from the pockets, I'll write you up myself and *you* can explain to Tyler why you thought that was a good idea." Johnathan continued, his voice dismissive. Obviously the man had made this lecture before and often enough to be bored by it.

The echo of several pairs of boots drummed through the town square and J.T. couldn't help but turn his head a touch. He didn't have a good vantage to see anymore than boots and

wrinkled hems but he saw enough. Roughly a dozen people marched into the square behind Johnathan and the whine of the phasers began to reach a fever pitch again. J.T.'s head thumped back against the ground. Jacob's hands tugged on his shirt.

The shots that rang out did not follow a rhythm. There was no rhyme or reason to the shots. Occasionally, there would be two in rapid succession and in other moments, there would be two or more simultaneously.

Every shot had him flinching into the dust and rocks under his body. At his side, the three kids barely breathed, each shot making their quiet little gasps of breath shorter.

A few more shots went off, interrupting a bite of wild laughter and playful shouts J.T. couldn't quite make out.

Footsteps clomped closer. J.T. froze, willing the person to keep walking. But of course, his luck had never been that good. The boots stopped in line with the soccer ball and crushed the ribbon into the dirt with careless abandon.

Annie twitched in J.T.'s arms.

J.T. freed his hand from between his teeth and slowly let go of the twins. He might have been on probation and technically a criminal, but as a messenger on Tarsus he had been allowed to carry a small pocket knife. The blade was too small to do any real damage, more a letter opener than a knife, but J.T. wasn't in the position to be picky. His hand slipped down to his pocket and for the first time, he cursed the fact his knife was folded. He could open the blade one handed, but the issue was the rather loud *click* that happened when the blade locked into place.

There was no way for him to muffle the sound. He would only have one chance. There was no getting out of this. They had survived the shooting only to die cursing at the guards who had come down to finish the job.

(J.T. had been born into massacre, it seemed he was destined to die the same way.)

The guard stooped down to their knees, one hand curling onto the bottom of the bench. J.T. resisted the odd urge to place his fingers on the hand. The guard was young. The hand barely had any wrinkles or calluses, but the nail beds were black with dirt and grease was stained into the knuckles. J.T. gripped his knife that much tighter. There was no time to move Jacob or to get the twins to scamper.

There was no time.

The guard poked his head below the bench.

J.T. stared back out, one hand on his knife and his other hand coming up to place a finger in front of his lips. The action was a reflex really. A response built after a lifetime with Frank's fists and huddling with Sam in cramped quarters.

The guard couldn't have been older than twenty. (In another lifetime, the two of them might have worked together, or even been in the same classes at a local college. In another lifetime, J.T. wouldn't be on a kill list, hidden under a bench, and eyeing the vulnerable spots on a guard that was too young by half.)

The guard opened his mouth.

(In another life, the two boys would cross on the street and that would be the end of their interaction. Maybe, in another life, things would have gone differently.)

J.T.'s hand twitched a bit higher. There was no time. There were no *options*.

The guard's eyes darted over to the twins, his teeth biting into his lip as he took in the scene. J.T., who had only ever had his pride and a body too quick for his brain, abandoned his pride as if it was a coat several sizes too small. *Please*. J.T. mouthed at the other boy. *Please*.

"Hey, Jor!" Johnathan's voice rang out, the shout bouncing off the walls and slithering through the dust. "Anything?"

The guard flicked his fingers at J.T. in a 'stay here' motion.

J.T. couldn't help but tense.

"No." Jor shot back, his face twisted into a frown of disappointment. "No breathers over here."

J.T. dragged in a shuddering breath, his hands fumbling to grab onto the twins and Jacob.

"Hey, Dylan called in sick today, right? I can stick around and help the disposal crew. Tyler won't bitch if there's more hands." Jor called out suddenly, a smug smirk on his face as he climbed back up to his feet.

J.T., for the first time since this hell started, closed his eyes and *breathed*. There was no point in praying, no point in appealing to the universe for mercy. He and the kids would make it out of this alive or they wouldn't. He could do nothing to change it. Still, curling forward so that his nose was tucked into Jacob's dust covered hair, J.T. fought the urge to cry.

Please. He mouthed into the empty air. *Please*.

"Fine, but don't expect overtime for it. You volunteered for the shift." Johnathan called out, his tone dark and heavy with boredom. "Everybody else, finish your sectors and head back to the barracks, we don't want to be late for dinner."

J.T. opened his eyes in time to see Jor sprint back to the gates. His footsteps were swallowed up by the march of the other guards and the low rumble of a diesel coming in from the distance.

(In the back of his mind, something twirled and twisted.)

"Yo, Sai. The hell do you have the short bed for? That ain't gonna do shit for this mess. Go back and get the tri-axel. The fifth-wheel? We're gonna need it." Jor drawled, his voice short and clipped. "No. No. No. Leave the short bed. I'll start the clean up. You go get the right equipment. Yes. Right now. Go!"

J.T. could barely hear the response Jor was given, the dust and death swallowing up the sounds of the living with greedy gulps. And anyway, the rumble of the diesel was enough to block whatever else was up and moving.

The low rumble of the diesel churned over the ground and J.T. swore the grumbling engine was vibrating his bones out of his body. *It wouldn't take much*, J.T. thought, his hands slipping around the kids. He had always been a thin and lanky child, a farm pup yet to grow into his hands and feet.

From under the bench, J.T. could hear the short flatbed jerking on the hitch and the secure chains clanking with every surge of the truck. There was something absurd about hearing those chains. It wasn't funny, not really, but at the same time, J.T. was forced to stifle a hysterical cackle. Even in the middle of a genocide, the health and safety protocalls of the colony were still in affect. (But only for the worthy it seemed.)

The truck rolled to a stop and overhead, the bench creaked. Jor's boots clomped into J.T.'s field of vision and it took everything he had not to flinch when the boy leaned against the bench and began to push, his boots sliding against the dirt and stones.

J.T. didn't know how long they had been under the benches. He didn't know what time it was. He had counted the moments by phaser shots and screams. He had kept track of the seconds by the thump of the bodies and the whine of the weapons. In the silence, he didn't know what to count. But, as the bench was pushed to the side, sunlight draped itself across J.T.'s skin and licked warmth into his frozen bones.

(In his chest, J.T.'s heart stuttered once. Twice. He was alive. *Alive.*)

(*Why* was *he* alive?)

J.T. didn't dare to move. Jor hadn't given him, them, away yet. He hadn't shouted for his crew or aimed his phaser towards J.T. or the three siblings.

"Alright." Jor said the crunch of the stone under his boots an odd explanation point to his words. "Let's get the first load out to the pit."

The twins stared back at J.T. in horror.

Jor's arms snaked under J.T.'s chest and knees and for a brief moment, J.T. couldn't help but tense. Jor discreetly pinched his side. It took far too much effort to become something like one of Sarah's rag dolls. It was even harder as he stared out between lowered eyelashes as the three siblings stared up at him.

Between one second and the next, Jor dropped him onto the trailer. And for the first time in his life, J.T. thanked the stars above for living with Frank. His head, hip, and feet seemed to

hit the trailer all at once. In the resulting starburst of pain behind his eyes, J.T. knew it was only due to Frank's heavy fists that he didn't make a sound.

Danny, Annie, and Jacob seemed to be placed on the trailer in a more gentle movement. But J.T. can't help but tense when he feels three sets of hands twitch onto his shirt. His skin positively *crawled* under the heavy summer air and the weight of the stares he can sense boring into his skin.

"Don't move." Jor snapped, his voice heavy with impatience. "No. No. No. Pin. In. Stay."

The flatbed dipped as Jor snagged the tongue and fiddled with the connections. But, J.T. knew the admonishment was for him and his kids. There was no need to play with the hitch, not when the trailer had already been connected.

Message received, J.T. thought as he heard Jor clomp around the flatbed and back up to the truck.

The low rumble of the diesel drowned out any other sound and the flatbed began to roll with a jolt that had J.T. fighting the urge to fling a hand out to stabilize himself. It was just like coming in after the wheat had been cut and the bales had been chucked up into the wagons. It was just like coming back home after a long night, without the threat of rain to make them rush to bolt back for cover or to get the bales off the fields.

It was just like home.

(J.T. could lie to himself all he wanted, this was nothing like home at all.)

J.T. kept his eyes closed, each jolt of the trailer making his breath catch and his heart stutter. They weren't going fast and the slow crawl out of the town square did nothing to stop the laughter and the comments of the crew that was coming in through the gates. J.T. could only hope that the kids had their ears covered or they were numb enough to block out the voices that floated over the truck.

Three little sets of hands curled into his shirt and J.T. forced himself to breathe as they drove through the gate.

In.

Out.

In.

Out.

In.

Out.

Breathe.

The trail slowly became less bumpy, the flatbed slipping into smoothed-out divots customary of a road long worn down. How many times had this path been taken, J.T. wondered as the flatbed rocked over a bump in the road. How many times had the dead been ferried to the fields? How had no one ever noticed?

(Had no one bothered to care?)

The truck came to a shuddering halt and for a moment, J.T. had to wonder if he had somehow passed the body pit on his way into town. They couldn't be too far outside of the city limits, they hadn't been moving long enough to be anywhere but just outside of the city.

(They had to be at the pits, J.T. decided after a moment. He didn't know anywhere else that might smell of rotting flesh and old blood.)

The truck shut off in a sudden coughing rumble, and almost immediately, J.T. heard the truck door slam.

"It's ok." Jor said, his voice loud in the silence of the fields. "You can sit up now."

J.T. didn't need more encouragement than that, already up and swinging to his feet before the words were completely out of the guard's mouth. If this was a trap, then so be it, but he wasn't going to be gunned down laying on a flatbed, outside of the death pits. At his side, the twins scampered up to their feet, but Jacob remained attached to his side like a burr.

In front of him lay a field of dust and white. (Something in his chest *hitched* .)

"Don't." Jor whispered, one hand coming down heavily on J.T.'s shoulder. "It's not something you want to see."

J.T. stood still beside the flatbed, Jacob in his arms and the twins curled into his sides, and for the life of him, he couldn't turn to look over his shoulder. He had the silence of the square ringing in his ears and the whine of the phasers in his bones. There was hunger in his blood and this late in the day, (this late into this whole damn massacre) J.T. couldn't even drag up the energy to be *angry*.

He was tired.

He was so damn tired.

J.T. licked at his lips, his head bowing forward under the weight of his kids' trust. He needed to know. He needed to know *everything*. Even if only so he knew where to avoid, where to mark as dangerous territory.

(He had already found Miss Mellony. Stars help him, he didn't want to turn around and see David.)

J.T. turned around anyway. He had to know. He had to see. At first, he didn't see much, just an awful lot of dirt and stone. Really, the whole place didn't look all that different then the work sites just outside of the shipyards back in Riverside. The whole place looked more like a scrap and refuse yard then a death pit.

J.T. shot Jor a look, his eyebrows raised as he tried to figure out if Jor had actually brought them to the pits. If the guard hadn't taken a detour to the dump in an effort to give J.T. and his kids a head start to get away.

But Jor simply shook his head, his chin dipped down so he wouldn't have to look around. J.T. looked back to the field, only to stumble when Jor shoved at his shoulder. "Get." The man snarled, his face twisted up into what J.T. thought might have been shame if it weren't for the lines of fury around his mouth. "Go. Don't come back."

J.T. stumbled back a few steps, the twins by his hips and Jacob in his arms. Jor took a step forward. "Go!"

J.T. went, his kids shuffling in his footsteps. Every step was a struggle, every breath tugged at the bruises his kids had left on his ribs. On his shoulder, Jacob was nothing more than dead (no, no, no, don't even *think* like that) weight and at his sides, the twins simply marched with the gait of mechanical soldiers. Under their feet, the dust barely even moved. The lack of rain kept even the worst of the overturned field subdued, even as they began to crest the hill into the edge of the woods that linked back up to the messenger trails. It wasn't until he heard the rumble of the diesel that he dared to look back.

(He should have listened to Jor.)

With the hill under his feet, J.T. was able to look back and cast his gaze over the field. At first, he didn't understand what he had been looking at. It was still the same dump, the same refuse pile of scrap that it had always been. But, the longer he looked, the more he was able to pick out.

There wasn't just one pit.

Up on the hill, J.T. stood frozen, the kids numb by his side. Cut haphazardly into the ground below were a series of pits. He couldn't count them, not because there were too many to comprehend, but simply because they were there at all. He couldn't even guess how deep they were and part of him didn't want to.

Sixty-three people didn't just disappear, J.T. thought with no small amount of horror. He had thought himself so clever for finding out the discrepancy. He had thought himself so smart for hacking the systems and combing over the census and inventory lists for the colony. He had thought himself so clever.

Sixty-three people didn't just disappear.

But neither did roughly a couple *thousand*.

How had he missed this?

How had anyone missed this?

How long had this been going on for?

In the end, the only reason J.T. managed to walk away was because of the kids. The twins, still holding onto his waist and Jacob a steady weight in his arms. J.T. slowly forced himself to turn and walk away, his gaze firmly rotating between the trees that swayed gently in the breeze and the trail both in front and behind them. Stars help him; he would not allow them to be shot after surviving that mess.

Each step dragged, the shuffling walk jarring his bones and dragging talons into his ribs. (How could he have been so stupid?) He just needed to get back to Fair Harvest. (How could he have missed *this* ?) He just needed to get back to Sarah, to Tommy. To Kevin. (Why hadn't he done anything to stop it?)

He just wanted to go home.

(There's no home left.)

The resulting trek was a blur.

At some point, J.T. found himself holding Jacob to his front with one arm while Annie climbed onto his back and hung around his shoulders with all the grace of a wilted flower. Her heels had bled through her stockings, her Sunday best not meant for anything other than brunch and sitting pretty. (Staring at the torn blisters and broken skin, J.T. vaguely remembered Richie mentioning how the worst part of the famine and shut down was that getting clothing and shoes for growing children had been more difficult than it had had any right to be.) Overhead, the sun still shone and the sky was a clear, clear blue.

Annie's cries were soft and hiccuping, her tears sliding down her cheeks even as J.T. placed a gentle hand under her knees and hauled her up.

It almost didn't seem fair.

(It was all his fault.)

By his side, Danny didn't even bother to ask for help. The eight-year-old's hand was still firmly wrapped around a corner of J.T.'s shirt, but the boy wouldn't look up. They both knew J.T. couldn't have carried him alongside Annie and Jacob.

"I'm sorry." J.T. croaked out, his throat burning.

(If he hadn't driven that car off that cliff...)

Danny shook his head. "It's alright." he said softly, his head shifting to lay on J.T.'s hip for a long moment. "Mum made Annie wear those stupid shoes that pinch her feet. It's not like she could walk far anyway."

J.T. held back a wince. Oh stars above, their *parents*. He had forgotten about their *parents*.

(There was no time.)

How was he going to explain to them that their parents weren't coming back? (What if their parents hadn't been there? What if it had just been Richie and his cousins? What if...)

J.T. cleared his throat. "Just a bit further." He said, as if he hadn't been chanting the same line for however long they had been wandering the trails. "Just a bit further."

Slowly, the ground under their feet changed from white downed forest trails to dusty fields. Then, even that changed. The shadows grew long and J.T. kept his head down as they trudged through the backroads and the fields, eventually (somehow) ending up exactly where J.T. had started that morning.

Overhead, the sun started its slow descent behind the horizon.

J.T. didn't even make it up the stairs to the deck. He didn't look for lights in the windows or even check to see if the door was unlocked. Danny was practically asleep at his side, and it took nothing to get the boy to plop down on the stairs. In any other time, any other day, it would have been cute how quickly the boy was asleep and slumped against the banister. In this one, J.T. was more concerned about getting Annie and Jacob onto the stairs and out of his arms.

The three siblings barely even twitched as J.T. laid one beside the other.

At the bottom of the stairs, J.T. dropped onto the ground, his back against the post of the railing. He didn't know what he was looking at when he gazed out onto the stretching shadows of the fields. He didn't pay them that much attention.

(He was looking at a hand flung out for him to take and a horrified expression of the only woman who had ever given him a chance. He was looking at the only other teenager who thought J.T. was ok, even if he was a bit young. He was looking at a guard who was far too young and had too much shame in his bones.)

Slowly, J.T. let his head fall back against the post even as he dragged his knees up to his chest.

(This was all his fault.)

He should have said something.

(If he hadn't thought himself so clever, maybe he would have been able to save more.)

He should have done something.

(How many people had died? How many people had he missed?)

(How many people did he fail?)

He sat there, under the stars that peaked out into the dusk, three children asleep on the stairs behind him. He should go in. He should step into Fair Harvest and let Tommy and others know he was back. He should go inside, if only to know if the others are even still at the farm house.

J.T. didn't move.

He didn't think he could face Sarah. He didn't think he could look at Tommy. He didn't think he would be able to explain to Kevin why he had gone looking for the boy's parents only to bring home three kids from the after school program.

J.T. didn't think he would be able to move at all.

J.T. leaned his head forward, his hand coming up to cover his mouth. He couldn't cry. He wouldn't cry.

He didn't have time (didn't have the right) to cry.

(This was all his fault.)

If J.T. cried at all that night, only the stars and three silent sleeps bore witness to it.

Chapter End Notes

Tarsus IV massacre happens with J.T. inside the town square. He, the twins, and Jacob hide underneath a set of benches and get rescued by a guard (Jor) at the end of the massacre. Miss Mellony and Richie do not make it out. Jor brings the four kids outside of town and then tells them to leave. The chapter ends with J.T. and the kids outside of Fair Harvest.

Things will look better in the morning

Chapter Notes

Hello everybody!

I am just as surprised about this update as you are, probably even more so. To be completely honest, I just came out a minor surgery yesterday (it wasn't an emergency, don't panic) and I hurt. To put it politely. Either way, this was a planned chapter update and nothing was written under the influence.

This chapter is mostly a filler to move us from one scene to the next, but there is plot in here as well,

Either way, I'm not completely happy with the chapter, but it will have to do. I couldn't get it *perfect* but I can work with this.

Anyway, as always, have fun, enjoy, and please don't shoot me!

-Lost

There was something to be said about waking up with a child glaring only two inches away from your nose. Tommy it seemed, was doing his best to burn a hole into J.T.'s head. From the expression that stayed on the boy's face even after J.T. lurched back with a curse and a tangle of flailing limbs, the boy was only a moment away from doing something that was regrettable. Not that J.T. didn't think he deserved whatever Tommy had thought up, he just was not in the mood to deal with whatever 'it' turned out to be.

"Heya Tommy." J.T. croaked, his joints creaked as he settled back against the railing of the steps. He had seized up overnight, a side effect of having held himself impossibly still the day before. (Had it been only the day before? Was it only yesterday that the devil stood atop a balcony and declared them all *damned* ? Was it only yesterday that he laid there under a bench and begged not to be *shot* ?)

Yet, instead of Tommy throwing a justified punch or breaking out into a blistering lecture, the boy did nothing at all. Absolutely *nothing*. The boy didn't say anything as Sarah and Kevin attached themselves to J.T.'s shoulders, half hysterical and crying. He said nothing as J.T. did his best to hold the kids close and not break down himself. But, perhaps that was it. Tommy didn't *need* to say anything. They both knew what couldn't be spoken.

How could you?

How could you leave me?

How could you leave and then make us think you were dead when you were asleep on the porch not even five feet from the house?

How could you?

How could you do it J.T.?

J.T. didn't have an answer (and even years later, he didn't think he would have been able to string together the words needed to absolve him of the crime he had committed. (That was the problem, wasn't it? He didn't have the words. He never had the words.)). But by the skies and stars above, he was *tired*. He was so tired .

It felt as if he hadn't slept at all.

"I'm back." J.T. croaked, his throat dry and his head swimming as his stomach clenched around nothing but acid and bile. "I'm back."

In front of him, Tommy dropped onto the ground, the dry dirt puffing up with a near silent whisper. For the first time since J.T. had woken up, the boy looked away, his gaze falling on the tips of his sneakers. In another time, the pout that settled onto the boy's face would have been cute, or at least something to tease Tommy about in the coming years. (Privately, J.T, had to wonder if they had enough time for this moment to become humorous.)

"Hey." Tommy whispered, his gaze still stuck on the tips of his sneakers.

J.T. would have said something if it hadn't been for the fact Kevin somehow managed to get a knee into his stomach as the boy flung himself towards the twins. J.T. didn't curse or shout, but it was a near thing as he doubled over and heaved in a breath. In the same moment, Sarah climbed up into his lap and threw her arms around his neck.

J.T. froze, his skin practically crawling. Instinctively, his arms folded around her and he hauled her close.

He shouldn't have been holding her.

He shouldn't have been touching her skin.

J.T.'s head dipped a touch lower and he practically *curled* around Sarah. The little girl hardly protested, if anything she seemed to be trying to snuggle even closer. He shouldn't have been holding her. He should have given her over to Tommy and stayed as far away as he could manage.

(J.T. had never been good at following the rules.)

Sarah was a vulcan, no matter how pretty her smile was, or how expressive she seemed. Sarah was a vulcan and J.T. made sure he only held onto her shirt and his other hand was cradling her head only through the cushion of her hair.

(In the back of his mind, there was a soft and quiet *click* .)

He had to reign in his emotions. He had to.

Every piece of him was stretched out and flayed, raw in a way that even Frank had never managed. (His mother had managed it, once. But that was years ago and J.T. was too old to care for her approval now.) He could see it, he thought a touch desperately. He could see the

words and the condemnations Kudos and his people had branded into the town square. He could see the accusations and the sneers on his skin. Hidden away under the dust and filth of the massacre were the reasons he had been selected and tossed aside like an old toy in the dirt.

He could still see that soccer ball, pressed up against the back wall of the square. He could still hear the *snap* of the twins' plastic twirler under Jor's heel. Was he like that, he wondered. A toy that was useless now that it had been used up and broken beyond repair.

(Jonathan gave him a sickly sweet smile. "It's no mistake. Why don't you head on in and see for yourself?")

On the ground in front of Fair Harvest, to the sounds of Jacob, the twins, and Kevin arguing and screeching, J.T. let himself shake apart. It wasn't a great big ugly thing. There were no choking sobs or hissed phrases. There was no anger, no screams. Frank had beaten that response out of him long ago. Once, when J.T. had still been Jimmy, he had tucked himself into musty closets and curled around old pillows and work shirts.

But that was not a luxury he had had in what seemed like an eon.

Sarah, gentle, sweet, baby Sarah, patted a hand ever so gently against his cheek. "T'ere, t'ere, J.T. T'ere, t'ere."

If anything, the comfort Sarah tried to offer only made him shake harder. Distantly, J.T. remembered the lessons that he had sat through in school, back when Frank had still been sober enough to care about appearances. He remembered the lectures about first contact and the so-called friendship with the Vulcans. He remembered David waxing poetry about his wife, when he was too tired to keep the grief back.

J.T. remembered the vague references to the fact Vulcans refused to let their emotions reign over them, and J.T. would be damned before he let anything else hurt Sarah. (Although, it should be noted that J.T. called bullshit on whoever said vulcans felt nothing at all. Evidently, that hypothesis had never met a two year old Vulcan child crying about a broken animal cracker. Or, better yet, had to deal with Sarah when she was wobbling her bottom lip and trying to coax out one more bedtime story.)

"Oh Sarah." J.T. murmured into her wild mane of hair. "Oh my Sarah."

The shaking hadn't stopped, it had hardly even slowed. Rocking back and forth every few seconds, J.T. allowed himself to pretend that nothing was wrong. That for a split second in time, he was just sitting outside of Fair Harvest waiting for the kids to begin their long trek home. He allowed himself to pretend that he was just sitting there with the back up flashlight, the lie that he was going out to patrol the fields on the tip of his tongue. (As if J.T. would ever allow the kids to walk home alone. This might be a colony where everyone knew everywhere else, but J.T. was one of the oldest kids around. He wouldn't walk out on the kids, not like Sam.) Out of the corner of his eye, J.T. watched as Kevin gracelessly threw himself onto the bottom step of the porch. And, just like that, the moment was gone.

Kevin tugged at his jacket. "J.T.," the boy asked, his eyes wide and his lip trembling, "did you find mum?"

There was something broken in J.T.'s chest. Something that was shattered and jagged and *howling*. There was something broken and J.T. still felt as if his skin was splitting apart at the seams and his bones were too jagged for his skin.

What could he say to a question like that?

Kevin was only *five*.

"Let's go inside." J.T. croaked out, instead of the scream that tugged at his tongue. "Let's go inside."

In a jumble of creaking bones and strained joints, J.T. managed to stand. Sarah was still in his arms. Jacob was crouched at his knee. The twins were wrapped around each other and Tommy all but hauled Kevin up and into Fair Harvest. J.T. didn't know what to do. Part of him wondered if he was still under that bench in the square and desperately trying to breathe.

Part of him wondered if he ever truly left.

He hardly noticed when the whole motley crew of kids were finally in the kitchen. The damn letter that had summoned him and Miss Mellony to town was still sitting there on the table. Mocking him.

(If he hadn't driven that car off that cliff, *none of this would have happened.*)

The only thing different from the previous day were the dishes piled in the drying rack. J.T. didn't know what Tommy and Kevin had eaten, there hadn't been much in the way of food for weeks. He had managed to get Sarah some crackers before they had found the boys on the porch, but that was nearing the end of his reserves.

J.T. cast an eye towards Tommy.

The boy gave him a small smirk. "Turns out Miss Mellony was smart. I went knocking around yesterday and found a few boxes of preserves tucked behind the soccer nets and hockey sticks."

Taken back, J.T. could do little but turn and stare at the front closet. Absently, he noted that he shouldn't have been too surprised, Miss Mellony had access to the duty roster and saw more of the community than J.T. ever had. If there had been any warning, she would have gotten wind of the danger long before J.T. But, the truly interesting fact was the squirreling away of the food. She had given him unspoken agreement to train and teach the other kids how to smuggle away important items like food and water, but he would never have thought of Miss Mellony employing the same tricks.

The game closet was consistently a mess. Dodgeballs and pucks somehow escaped their netting on a daily basis, and that wasn't to mention the big ticket items that seemed to be moved around and around the room without rhyme or reason. Most of the time, it was a

struggle to simply open the door, and once inside, one had to know exactly what they were looking for, or they could be distracted and entangled for *hours*.

The game closet was also in the complete opposite direction of the pantry.

Still smirking, Tommy turned on his heel and marched over to the counter. As he reached over to the bread box, he glanced back over his shoulder. "I think she put the last restock straight into the closet. The bread was a bit stale, but..."

He didn't get to finish as all the kids perked up and stared.

"I'll bring the loaf over then and we can start on breakfast." Tommy eventually managed to squeak, his eyes wide under the collective gazes of the younger kids.

J.T. nodded a bit robotically and when Sarah began to squirm in his grasp, he placed the little girl on the ground without a comment. She seemed content to wander off to the little basket of yarn Miss Mellony toted around for crafts and crochet projects alike. And, for a while, J.T. was content to let her play.

At his side, Danny tugged on the hem of J.T.'s dusty shirt. "J.T., Annie needs some help."

With a start, J.T. looked over at Annie, who was still hovering by the front door, a pained grimace plastered across her dirty face. For a moment, J.T. could only stare, his brain still stuck on the horror of the day before.

This was all his fault.

That was all his...

"Your shoes." J.T. eventually managed to sigh, one hand coming up to rub over the bridge of his nose. "I forgot about your shoes."

"It's alright." Annie said quickly, her lower lip trembling as she gripped onto the door frame and shifted her weight. "I can..."

"No." J.T. broke in quickly, already halfway to the door with his hands held out towards her. "No, it's not. You slept with them on."

Danny hovered anxiously, his hands fluttering through the air as J.T. picked up Annie and brought her over to the table. Thankfully, Annie was a rather slight ten year old and hadn't yet hit her growth spurt. Neither of the twins had, which J.T. thought was a rather good thing. Growing children during a famine were not easy things to keep fed.

Plunking her down on top of the table, J.T. knelt and gently picked up her leg, careful to stay away from her heel. Frowning before he even looked at her foot, J.T. was surprised to see the little girl had stockings on. He hadn't even known they made stockings for girls that young. Although, even with his inexperience with the sheer material, he was willing to bet the stockings were completely unsalvageable, what with the long runs and gouges that raked up and down her legs.

Shaking his head, J.T. forced himself to get back to the matter at hand. Slowly he lifted up Annie's leg again and with gentle fingers, began to unbuckle the straps.

"You'll tell me if it hurts." J.T. ordered when Annie's foot jerked in his grasp.

"It didn't hurt." Annie said quickly, her voice a touch too high for the statement to be the truth.

J.T. didn't even look up from where his hands had stilled on the sole of the shoe. "Annie."

Annie jerked her foot out of J.T.'s hands and crossed her leg over her other knee. "It didn't hurt." She protested as she yanked the shoe off.

The blood that began to flow from the back of her heel was a rather nice counterpoint to his shout for Tommy to grab the first aid kit under the sink. The next few seconds were chaotic and wild. Annie, unsurprisingly, began to cry, her too-small shoe still held in hand. Danny, unable to bear the sight of his sister's tears, climbed up onto the table to tug her into a hug. Jacob, wide-eyed at the blood, latched himself onto J.T.'s hip.

Tommy plunked a bowl of water onto the table and half tossed a cloth into Annie's lap without any prompting.

"Alright Annie." J.T. began as he slowly flicked open his knife and cut through the stockings as gently as possible, creating something like a legging and a sock, instead of a footed stocking. "I'm gonna have to peel this off. I need you to stay still and try not to break my nose." His dry comment at least managed to startle a wet chuckle out of the girl, which he counted as a win.

Jerking his head towards Annie's legs, J.T. was happy to see that Tommy willingly climbed up onto the table and pinned Annie, even if it was with a muffle apology.

Deciding it was probably kinder not to warn Annie what he was about to do, J.T. quickly tugged the stocking off the back of her heel. Annie jerked a bit and yelped, but did nothing else as J.T. twisted her heel and checked to make sure nothing else had gotten stuck in the wound. Satisfied after a few pokes, J.T. wrapped up her ankle quickly before turning and doing the same process to her other foot. During the whole thing, Danny kept muttering and whispering things to his sister. When he was finished, J.T. patted Annie's knee a bit awkwardly. Although, considering how Tommy stuttered and practically flew off Annie's legs, J.T. figured he could be forgiven for hardly being a comforting figure.

"J.T."

J.T. just about screeched when Kevin popped up at his side, a tangle of yarn held in his hands.

"J.T., I'm hungry."

"I'll do it!" Tommy all but shouted as he scrambled off the table and away from the twins, a dark flush on his cheeks.

From there, it was only a matter of cleaning up the table and getting everyone to settle back at the table, Sarah included. The last bit should not have been as difficult as it turned out to be, but J.T. was tired and it took him longer than it should have for him to concede to Sarah about bringing the ball of yarn to the table. Of course, then she wouldn't go to her own seat and insisted on sitting on J.T.'s lap.

Breakfast was spent with J.T. half cuddling Sarah on his lap and making sure she ate. J.T. could barely make himself eat in the end. It wasn't that he didn't want to. His stomach was practically gnawing his bones into shards in impatience. But every time he went to put the bread into his mouth, all he could smell was the town square on his clothes.

He ate anyway.

Soon enough, all the kids were drooping. And J.T., while hating that it was fear and the continued lack of food that made the kids so tired, couldn't help but be thankful. Herding them all upstairs was easy. Getting them into his room and piled on various cushions and spaces was even easier.

Soon enough, all that was left was J.T. awake at his desk chair. He couldn't move too much, as Jacob was curled under his desk and Kevin was stretched outside it. Tommy was in the windowsill and his bed hosted the last three.

For a moment, J.T. could only stare at the kids dogpiled on top of his bed. They shouldn't stay the night. They really shouldn't, but J.T. couldn't find it in himself to haul the kids out of bed and coax them out into the hills.

Every hour they stayed at Fair Harvest was another hour Kudos' men had to find them. They were sitting ducks. For now they were safe, but J.T. couldn't help but wonder how long that was going to last.

How long could they hide?

(How long could he keep the others ignorant of the truth?)

(How long could he keep them innocent?)

Leaning back in the chair, J.T. did his best to hold back the shudders he thought he had left behind at the kitchen table. He wouldn't start crying. Not here.

Not now.

Shifting a bit, he curled up into the chair and looked over towards his desk, desperate to take his mind off of the kids. The kids were not what was haunting him, not really. He knew himself better than that. No, J.T. knew what was haunting him was the town square. Sixty-three people didn't just disappear. But they hadn't disappeared, had they? Every single person was accounted for. They were exactly where they were supposed to be.

(They were where J.T. *should have been.*)

"Stop it." J.T. hissed, the words low and cutting. "Stop it. Stop it. Stop it. Stop..."

There was a soft *clink* from the desk.

J.T.'s fingers loosened in his hair just a touch. Slowly, he lifted his head from his knees and looked towards the desk. He hadn't noticed before, which was understandable when he thought about it, but there was something propped up against his desk light. It wasn't big and even with the curtains drawn, J.T. could make out the general shape.

It was a doll.

Frowning, J.T. turned slightly towards the bed. Sure enough, in Sarah's hands was her monster teddy bear of a plushie from Vulcan and that creepy button-eyed doll from town. Thoroughly confused, J.T. turned back towards his desk and gently reached out to pluck the doll up.

"Alright, who the hell are..." He trailed to a stop and stared. That was his jacket with the same hacked off parts and ratty seams. Those were his boots, large and clunky. That was his shirt, stupid Fair Harvest smile and all. It was him. The doll was a mini-J.T. The only thing that was different was the button eyes.

"Huh." J.T. managed after a long moment. He wasn't sure what hurt more, the thought that Miss Mellony had made Sarah a doll that looked just like her J.T., or that he only found it now. After Miss Melloney had...

Shuddering, J.T. leaned forward, the doll held loosely against his forehead. The soft sounds of the kids sleeping filling the room around him. "David," J.T. whispered, his throat closing around the words as he fought not to break down completely, "David, what am I going to do?"

Nobody wants to burn

Chapter Notes

Hi Everybody,

I know, I know, this is almost a year late, but I kinda forgot this fic existed for a little bit.

I do have a rough outline and I don't know when the next chapter will be posted, but I needed to set the scene for the Belladame in the next chapter.

Whoops

Spoiler

:P

Anyway, as always have fun, enjoy, and please don't shoot me.

-Lost

Warnings:

Mentions of eugenics

mentions of mass genocide, funerals, and cremations

The following morning brought no answers to J.T. 's late night questions. In fact, the morning brought nothing but a lingering ache in his joints and a crick in his neck. Which shouldn't have been too surprising when he considered the fact that he had, once again, fallen asleep at his desk.

His whole head throbbed, the spark of a migraine grinding away at the back of his eyes. His curtains were still thrown shut and when he twisted to look at the bed, the kids were still passed out in the piles he had seen the night before. Well, all except Tommy it seemed. J.T. jolted back slightly at the glint of eyes in the dark, only relaxing when he realised that Tommy had rolled his head back against a pillow and was calmly looking at J.T. in the dark.

“How long have you been up?” J.T. couldn't help but hiss, wincing as Sarah twitched in her sleep.

The only reply he got was a long and slow blink from Tommy.

Right.

Well then.

He might as well get up.

The rest of the morning went about as well as he might have expected. The hours bleed together and tumble into the afternoon, and eventually the evening. None of the kids laugh, scream, dance, or fidget more than little tentative jerks in the mainroom, little toy cars and Miss Melloney's yarn scattered across the floor.

And then the day slipped into night, and the cycle repeated. J.T. woke up with a migraine, Tommy followed soon after, and the hours proceeded to bubble over into each other. Day in and day out for nearly three days. They didn't leave the house, the curtains were all drawn and the promise of food was the only reason for the kids to plod from one room to the next.

(J.T. can't stand it, the way his kids begin to look, gaunt and haunted.)

(Scared)

(Resigned.)

It only gets worse when J.T. finds Annie curled up on the stairs, her knuckles shoved between her teeth and her ankles sluggishly bleeding onto the scuffed wood.

J.T. had forgotten about her heels.

"I can walk." Annie offered softly, her head bowed and her hair falling in front of her face like a tangled and dirty curtain. "I promise J.T., I can walk."

J.T. shifted on his heels, his head pounding and his hands still, if only because he had them pressed firmly against his knees. "Nah, kiddo." He whispered back, everything in him screaming at the mere thought of being gentle. "You just rest up. Tommy and I gotta get the gear together anyway, right? No need for you to be tottering under foot yet."

Predictably, Annie swatted at the hand J.T. lifted to ruffle her hair, her lips pulling together in a mock-frown. "I can still walk you know, and I ain't a baby!"

There were cracks in her words and J.T. could see the splintered shards behind her eyes. All it would need was a swift poke. A moment of cruel mocking or gnashing teeth in her direction and those shards would come raining down upon them all. If J.T. were kind, he'd push her. He'd poke at those shards and make her cry. She was too young to be bottling up emotions (yes, J.T. realised he was a hypocrite, but there was no need to be *mean* about it) and arguably, they were *safe* for the moment.

They were safe.

It would be kinder for Annie in the long run, but J.T. couldn't. He *couldn't*. J.T. couldn't stand to see Annie cry. He could barely hold himself together, let alone a little girl. So instead, J.T. picked her up, her weight so *slight* against his hip, and marched towards the kitchen table.

J.T. could barely find it in himself to be kind, but he could be gentle.

For them, he could be gentle.

Tommy, ever lovely and useful Tommy, placed a bowl in front of J.T. before J.T. could get a word in edgewise. And then, Tommy proved himself a far better man than J.T. would ever be, because he took Annie and settled her beside her brothers. And J.T. couldn't help but stare as the other kids quickly came to the table. Sarah, of course, forced herself up onto J.T.'s lap, but J.T. hardly cared.

"It looks like Miss Melloney got smart and made a whole bunch of stock soups and bottled a bunch of water when the wells started popping up contaminated." Tommy commented softly as he sunk down into the seat beside J.T.. "As long as we have access to water and a heat source, we should be alright for a bit."

J.T. nodded his thanks over Sarah's head. Soup wasn't his favourite but he knew better than to complain, even in his own thoughts. Food was scarce. The fact Miss Melloney had even managed to dry and prepare the mixture, spoke to how little anyone ever thought about the woman. J.T. certainly would never have thought about what Miss Melloney did when no one else was around.

(The fact she had never said a word about his knives or how he taught his kids how to scurry things away and stay *safe* should have spoken volumes. But he had never noticed and now he had to wonder what else he had missed.)

Before he knew it, the soup was gone and he was ordering the twins into a bath. With how little uncontaminated water there was, showers had been tossed out a while back, particularly with the children. It was easier to throw a few kids into a tub and rotate them through rather than letting an abundance of water slip through the drain.

The rest of the night goes smoothly. The kids rotate through the bath with little to no complaints and J.T. breathed a sigh of relief even as the skies grew dark and his own exhaustion tugged at his veins.

(How was he going to do this?)

...***...

At night, when the kids are all asleep, passed out on various bunks throughout the house, J.T. slipped down to the kitchen with his PADD and stared at the data he had been mining from the servers and networks for the past few weeks.

He stared down at the data and his ears echoed with the sound of phaser fire. J.T. wasn't a stupid boy, for all that his body worked faster than his brain. He wasn't a stupid boy, but the data on his PADD made no sense. Even with his scattered education J.T. had learned about Earth's third war. He had even heard about one of the founding principles of the Federation. Eugenics, and the theory around it, was illegal. No sentient being was to be subjected to the eugenic programs.

But this?

Those files J.T. had smugly downloaded and sorted through?

(He had thought himself so *clever*.)

Why hadn't he been suspicious? Why hasn't he asked more about the fact there was a gated community in a colony that was supposed to make all people *equal* ?

He sat at the table, looked vacantly at a PADD, and for the first time in his life, wished he wasn't able to read and comprehend at a post-secondary level.

J.T. was thirteen years old and in front of him was the ramblings of a madman dabbling in eugenics. This wasn't a famine. This wasn't an outbreak.

This was an *experiment* .

And he was the lab rat.

J.T. sat at the table and he didn't cry. He didn't grieve for the dead or try and bargain with the stale air in the kitchen. He didn't run out into the fields and scream until his throat was raw.

Instead, he grabbed the few perishable ingredients they had in the house and began to plan out breakfast. Instead, he raided the pantries and the hideaways and catalogued the remaining food and water. He gathered up knives and camping supplies.

And J.T. started to plan.

...***...

Later, he wouldn't be able to explain how he convinced the kids to follow him in the morning. Maybe it was the look on his face or the fact that he finally felt grounded in his skin.

But the kids, his kids, followed him. Little Annie he kept in his arms. Jacob tottered beside Tommy, and Kevin danced with Sarah and Danny. All of them wore a backpack. All of them had supplies in hand. And J.T. lead them. He brought them up into the hills, far into the woods, and out past any point a saner guard would wander.

(But this wasn't sane. This whole damn world, of fluffy mold and dusty fields, of broken bodies and laughing guards. None of this was sane.)

J.T. lead them deeper still.

He only stopped when he found his cave.

J.T. had been a messenger. He had crawled all over Tarsus and there were few places he hadn't seen and fewer still he hadn't explored.

His kids looked to the cave as one.

J.T. crouched down, Annie settled across his lap as he looked them all in the eye, his gaze sharp. "If something happens, you come here. Don't try to be a hero. You come here and you hide."

The cave was deep. J.T. hadn't had too much time to explore how far into the cliffs it went. At the furthest point, the cave shrank down into a small crawl away tunnel. J.T. hadn't been able to crawl through it yet, but the likelihood of animals or critters in the tunnel was slim to none. In the end, what mattered was that the entrance was difficult to spot unless you knew what you were looking for and while inside they were safe from the elements.

...***...

Two weeks later, when smoke began to rise up from the direction of town, J.T. couldn't have been prouder when all of his kids, even little Sarah, appeared at the kitchen door with packs of supplies in hand.

They had already brought most of the supplies to the cave. Bedding, food, water, cooking gear, little solar power rigs, J.T. had brought it all. (If, tucked away at the very far back of the cave, almost in the tunnel, there was a carefully wrapped package that only he and Tommy knew about, well, who was to care? Maybe a smarter boy would have hidden away a phaser or a final backup plan, but J.T. had always had a body too fast for his brain. The phaser was under his pillow at the front of the cave, and at the back, wrapped up in a triple layer of water proof canvas, was a padd with every single file J.T. had managed to download from the community's servers.)

(J.T. had been born into an incident no one could explain. He'd be damned if he went out the same way.)

...***...

Smoke won't stop billowing up from town and J.T. half wonders if the *Governor* had decided to cull them all.

It would serve them right.

...***...

They've been in the cave for three days. J.T. had played more rounds of Crib and Sorry than he ever wanted to in his lifetime.

However short that may be.

At least the kids were happy.

After J.T. had finally managed to get Sarah down for the night, Tommy latched onto his side. Tommy had never been a clingy boy and while J.T. had begun to notice cracks in the boy's attempt at normalcy, Tommy had held on for longer than he had expected.

"J.T." Tommy eventually whispered, the two of them half hunkered down behind the cave wall.

Their cave was not the perfect hiding spot. While the entrance was difficult to spot through the trees, the opposite was also true. Visibility to the outside of the cave was limited.

After the first night, when J.T. had woken himself up at even the slightest noise outside, J.T. had taken it upon himself to do a half-assed guard rotation through the night.

(No one knew they were out in the woods. No one knew they were alive. Ignorance was their only defence but J.T. was not about to trust it, not completely.)

"J.T.," Tommy whispered again, his fingers twisting in his lap as he kept glancing towards the ever present billowing cloud of smoke. "J.T., I'm a farm kid, yeah? An' I know this is just rambling and a stupid request but..."

The boy chewed at his bottom lip for a moment before he straightened his shoulders. "Don't burn me."

Whatever J.T. might have been expecting this wasn't it. "What?"

Tommy tilted his head towards the smoke cloud. "Neither of us are stupid, J.T. We both know what that cloud is "

J.T. can't look at the boy. He can't.

They're just kids.

Children.

(All J.T. can see is phaser fire and all he can smell is the slow cooking of meat in the afternoon sun.)

(He is hungry.)

Tommy leans his head against J.T.'s shoulder. "I don't want to burn."

Life Continues

Chapter Notes

So, funny story...

These last few weeks have been a little hectic, what with my power tools trying to kill me (first time i got staples instead of stitches, so that was cool) and a car accident flying pretty much right beside me. (That one I didn't even get a bruise. Shock? yes. Bruise? no.) and everything else going on, I'm just proud I got something written!

Its also 2 am and I am tired, so lord knows if this whole chapter makes sense.

It should.

I'll check in the morning.

Warnings:

Physical affects of starvation

Tarsus IV

as always, have fun, enjoy, and please don't shoot me!

Lost

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

J.T. had two skinned palms and two bleeding knees. The phantom memory of saying 'James Tiberius Kirk,' burned in his throat and this time, he knew he would choke on his name. Behind him, there were no smoking ruins of a starship or the twisted remains of a cherry red Corvette. Instead, he had a handful of children of varying ages huddled in the dark.

To make matters worse, J.T. has a stomach that has forgotten how to grumble, hands that refuse to be steady, and a tongue that just keeps on wagging. J.T. had a dozen kids and he'd be damned if he sent them to sleep in fear. He may have to send them to bed hungry but he'd *never* send them to bed in fear. (He isn't Frank.)

Little itty-bitty Sarah, too pale and too gaunt, looked up at him through matted black hair and the collar of J.T. 's leather jacket, and J.T. just kept talking. (There was nothing else he could do. There is no food, no water, and no more blankets to hand out. J.T. has nothing but the words in his head and a bunch of half remembered holos to offer.)

It wasn't enough. (It *had* to be enough.)

"...In a hole in the ground, there lived a hobbit. Now, this hole in the ground was not just dirt, rocks, and whatever the hell Tommy just picked up over there. Yeah, kid. I see you, put that down. Anyway, this hole in the ground. Danny, stop poking your sister. This hole in the ground was a hobbit hole, and a hobbit hole meant comfort..."

(If there was a joke, J.T. had yet to find it.)

The hours blended together and J.T. kept his voice low and his whispers steady. He one hand was rubbing circles into the shoulder blades that jut out of little Sarah's back like wings. He had another hand placed gently on top of Danny's ankle. He doesn't know if he's got the story right or if he's mashing a bunch of different characters together to create something happier. (If he is being honest, he didn't have the energy to care.) He doesn't care about much outside of his kids.

(J.T. didn't even look up to the stars anymore. There was no point.)

"There were thirteen dwarrow and one wizard and Bilbo Baggins was not impressed..."

...***...

There was smoke in J.T.'s lungs.

In some ways, he thought it was better than the white poison on the ground.

His kids aren't dancing or playing. Sarah barely had enough energy to sit up and totter around the cave. The twins were curled around each other, whispers slipping into the silence. Kevin and Jacob played with two rusted out dinky cars, and J.T. wanted to weep.

"We can't keep going like this." Tommy whispered into his ear, dust coating every inch of him. "We can't."

Well, they couldn't go into town either. A smoky haze had fallen across Tarsus and J.T. didn't know what to do. What could he do? If he went into town, he risked being shot. If he didn't, then they all risk starving to death. He can't win, if he's found out then the guards will hunt them down and his kids can't run.

They couldn't keep rationing, they barely had enough as it was. J.T. didn't dare eat the wildlife that wandered through, coated from snout to tail in white fluff. And they have filters for the water, but those wouldn't last much longer. They were going to die and no one would even know.

They couldn't win.

Slowly, J.T. gave Tommy a short nod of acknowledgement even as he got up and stumbled towards Sarah. His Sarah was barely awake and she was far too light when J.T. picked her up and cuddled her against his chest.

"How about another story, eh?" J.T. called out softly.

The dust of the cave barely stirred as his kids gave a variety of grumbling answers. And slowly, so painfully slow, his kids crawled towards him, dragging ratty blankets and gaunt limbs behind them.

"Once upon a time..."

...***...

Annie and Sarah's hair had begun to fall out of their haphazard braids in chunks. Sarah had been too tired to even notice as J.T. had rocked her, his hands gently smoothing her hair away from her forehead. Annie on the other hand, had stared at J.T. with glazed eyes and shuddering shoulders. (There wasn't enough water for her to even cry.) Her brothers sat behind her, slowly detangling strand after strand, their hands shaking too much to be much help. J.T.'s boys had also begun to lose hair, but it was something different to see Sarah and Annie lose their long braids.

"It's ok." J.T. murmured as Annie shot into his arms. He didn't dare stop rocking his girls, not when Annie was shuddering and Sarah was blinking as if she had woken up after a long nap. "It's going to be ok. I'm so proud of you. I'm so, so proud of you and how brave you're both being."

...***...

The last of the soup hit the bottom of the bowl and J.T. watched as the realisation spread across Tommy's face. There were seven bowls and barely enough soup for six.

"I'm not hungry." J.T. lied, a shaky smile on his lips.

Tommy's lips trembled for a moment and the boy, the sweet and kind boy, looked down at his bowl with shaking hands and hunched shoulders.

"You don't have to feel guilty," J.T. soothed with a rasping voice. "It's ok, you can eat."

Tommy gasped, his hands hardly touching the bowl.

"Hey," J.T. began, his smile trembling. "Hey, it's ok."

Tommy shuddered, his hands coming up to cover his face as he rocked back and forth, the bowls forgotten. "I want my mum."

"I know." J.T. said. What else could he say? It wasn't alright and he wasn't sure it would ever be alright. They were in a cave on a planet full of poison and there was no end in sight. They were just prolonging everything, that's all.

"I'll do a run." J.T. whispered as his kids slowly crept up and slunk away with their own bowls, arms huddled fiercely around the food. "Yeah, ok. I'll do a run tomorrow. Maybe old man Jenkins had some stuff set aside in his cellar."

He doubted it, J.T. really, really doubted it, but he couldn't keep sitting there watching his kids die slowly. He was damned if he went and damned if he stayed. At least if he went out of the cave, he would be doing *something*.

Reaching forward, J.T. picked up Tommy's bowl. With one hand, he grabbed Tommy's wrist and gently pulled it away from his face. "Come on Tommy, you need to eat."

...***...

Standing in the fruit cellar of the Jenkins farm, J.T. could have wept.

Water jugs, protein bars, canned goods, and a bug out bag were all tucked into the corner. It was a better bounty than he had expected, it was smaller than he had hoped.

They'd eat for a week.

He couldn't help but sneak a bite before he even began to pack up the supplies.

(J.T. was *starving*.)

...***...

The first run had made him bold. J.T. had come back with *salvation* in a bag and for the first time in days, he saw all his kids smile . Little Sarah had even been persuaded to stand up and *walk* towards him. (J.T. had nearly cried.)

And then he went back out again. Never for long and never too far away. And he knew better than to go to town. The smoke and the haze made the whole planet feel like a graveyard. Well, more of a graveyard he supposed. The dead outnumbered the living after all. But every run he did felt vaguely blasphemous, as if his attempt to carry his kids into the future was profanity against the planet itself.

J.T. never saw another soul during his runs. He wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not. Out in the fields, with brittle grass and white poison kicked up with every step, he sometimes thought he was the only one left alive. (On those days, if he cut the run short to go back to the cave and check on his kids, well, who was to call him out?)

But the success of the supply runs had made him bold. And J.T. had always figured that if anyone was going to get them caught, it would be him. Bad things always happened around J.T. First it had been his birth, a whole ship of exploding metal and screams. Then came Frank, and George, and that damn Corvette. Things went wrong when J.T. showed up and he knew it was only a matter of time.

Still, it was a bit of a shock when J.T. had called for a break in a round of *Sorry* for lunch, and Kevin refused his portion.

Concerned, J.T. had beckoned Kevin over. The boy tottered over with hands worrying the hem of his shirt and his shoulders hunched up around his ears. It was one thing if Kevin was declining his food because he thought he was being kind, it was quite another if the boy did not (could not) feel that he was hungry. The first was easy to fix, the later was much more concerning.

“You want to tell me what’s wrong buddy?” J.T. asked as he sank down to sit on his heels.

Kevin’s head was ducked down and he shuffled in place as if he were in trouble. J.T. frowned. For all that his kids were a well-behaved bunch, there was actually very little for them to do wrong. They hardly left the area in and around the cave and J.T. was the only one who dared to go beyond the treeline.

"We're going to have some canned peaches for dessert." J.T. tried again, his gaze shifting around to try and catch the boy's eye.

Kevin's shoulders practically crawled up and around his ears. "M'not hungry."

"You're a growing boy." J.T. said flatly. "You're never not hungry."

Kevin shrunk further into himself and J.T. couldn't help but frown.

"I already ate, J.T." Kevin said, his hands twisting around and around. "I'm sorry."

J.T.'s gaze shot to Tommy over Kevin's shoulder, and already the boy was shaking his head. Instead of relaxing, J.T. could feel the tension in his shoulders wind tighter. Tommy hadn't seen Kevin wat, which meant...

"Auntie Mells said it was ok!" Kevin said with a gasp, his lips trembling. "I'm sorry!"

"What?" J.T. said flatly.

(He was desperately not thinking about the way his caretaker had flung out a hand. He was desperately not thinking about how she had hugged him that first night and told him about her dream. Miss Melloney had been *bright bright bright* but she was also *dead dead dead...*)

Kevin frantically nodded his head and pointed towards the very back of the cave. "She's in the tunnel!"

And J.T. was officially freaked out. Miss Melloney was dead. He had watched her *die* and there was no way in *hell* that Kevin had actually seen her. (Later, he would be proud of the way Tommy pulled Kevin back and gently rounded up the other kids. He would be proud of how they all slipped towards his bed and Tommy had shakenly pulled out J.T.'s phaser. Later, he would be proud.)

(In the moment, he only felt *terror*.)

Swallowing, J.T. stood up and walked towards the tunnel, falling to his knees when he had gotten close enough. He wasn't sure what he had expected to find. Kevin's blanket? The remnants of a nap that had convinced the boy he had eaten? Instead, he found little footprints. Kevin's to be exact. He was the only one with a zigzag tread on his shoes. The little bundle of data J.T. had stowed away had been pushed off to the side, the wrapping around it oddly disturbed.

What he did not expect to find were six sandwiches and seven cups of chilled juice. He could still see the ice cubes in the glasses.

"What." J.T. repeated flatly, his hands twitching even as his mouth began to water and his stomach began to twist.

Food.

Fresh food.

And even more impossibly, *fresh bread* .

There were little skitters of dread crawling along his skin and J.T. was stuck staring at the little plates and cups.

It was an impossibility.

It had to be a trap.

(Maybe, just maybe, it was a *miracle*.)

"She's down here!"

For a split second, J.T. was positive his bones had jumped out of his skin at Kevin's shout. His heart just about followed when he looked down and watched Kevin *crawl through the tunnel*.

And of course, there was nothing else he could do but follow.

Chapter End Notes

For my non-Canadian readers, please be aware that Sorry is the board game Trouble. The Canadian version often utilises a deck of cards instead of dice, but they're the same game when it comes down to it, just different formats.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!