

The Many Names and Faces of James Tiberius Kirk

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The Many Names and Faces of James Tiberius Kirk

by [DownEarth](#)

Summary

Jimmy went to Tarsus to escape his step-Father, just for 6 months till his mom was grounded again. Then 6 months turns to 14, and 14 months turns into a never-ending nightmare. With the noose ever tightening around his neck, and tasked with keeping his kids alive, JT must find his will to live out of spite and anger and guilt.

This is the main story of the series 'Trials and Tribulations of James T. Kirk.' Other works in this series include canon scenes and snippets that didn't quite fit in this story, but nonetheless demanded to be written. Enjoy!

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

Mistakes

The last time Jim ever saw his aunt alive, she was crying. He was thirteen and being led onto a bus alongside his cousins and had glanced out the tinted window on a whim. She had been standing in the doorway to their farmhouse, clutching little Sarah's favorite blanket, arguing with one of the large men dressed in black that had come to take them back. The man had laid his hand on his belt, saying something, and Aunt Josie had broken down crying. Through a cloud of red dust as they drove away, Jimmy saw her fall to her knees and sob. Tear tracks cut through the dirt on her face, leftovers from when they'd been playing in the garden earlier. They turned a corner and trees finally blocked his view, and he turned back to talk to his cousins.

He was only supposed to be on Tarsus IV for six months. Driving the car into the canyon had been the last straw, and even though they'd 'worked things out' with the cops, Jimmy knew he'd pushed too hard. Frank was fed up with him and he'd been suspended from school again and his mother was still out there, exploring space without him. Winona said she would be earthside ' *in just six months, Jimmy, it's only six months,* ' and that this was just a stopgap to get him away from his step-father. What a load of bull that was, not that he'd say it to her face. Two months in, when he moved into boarding school full-time and wasn't counting down the days till his shuttle home, Winona messaged him. She told him her ship, the U.S.S. Faragaut, would be delayed eight additional months and for the first time, he wasn't heartbroken. Fourteen months in the colony, he could make it fourteen months. His aunt actually liked him, she never even hit him, and his cousins didn't treat him like a burden the way Sam used to. Classes challenged him, for the most part, and he got to go back home every weekend to see his aunt and the farmhouse. Sure, meals weren't that big, but Jimmy had never really gone hungry here, either. It was more consistent than living with Frank. Tarsus was good. Life was *good*.

This time, though, as the farmhouse faded from view, he could tell his Aunt knew something was different. Clouds of red dust obscured his view and it felt like he was losing something, somewhere he'd finally started to call home. It was silly to get so melancholy about a semester at boarding school, he'd thought. He'd thought a lot of things that ended up being wrong.

It was two Saturdays later when Jimmy and Will finally wondered if something was wrong. A full two weeks since they had seen the rest of their family. They were sitting on his cousin's bed, each with a PADD in hand, working on their homework. Their teacher, Hoshi, had been grilling them on languages, and despite Jimmy's efforts Will couldn't grasp Vulcansu conjugations.

"No, see, it's a past tense irregular verb, and you forgot the hyphen-"

“Jimmy.” Will interrupted him, something he never did. His face, normally an open book, was drawn and stiff. Jimmy held his tongue and swallowed back his knee-jerk snarky response. His cousin took a deep breath, held it for five seconds, and let it out in a huff.

“I’m worried about my mom. She hasn’t been responding to my comms all week, and Mr. Davies told me we aren’t doing home visits next weekend, either. I just... I know you think it’s stupid to get all worked up over family, but this isn’t like her.”

Neither of them said anything for a minute, both brains running through the options. Finally, Jimmy sighed. He knew his cousin well enough to know where his mind had immediately gone, and had an idea of how to deal with it.

“Look, Will, I do understand where you’re coming from. If you’re really that worried about Aunt Josie, how about we go see her? Will that make you feel better?” Jimmy tossed his PADD aside and stood up, stretching his arms over his head and groaning exaggeratedly. Honestly, he’d been wanting to stretch his legs too, but hadn’t had the right opportunity to sneak out until this moment.

His cousin wasn’t convinced yet, though. “What do you mean? How are we supposed to get home if buses aren’t running to the farm?”

Jimmy smirked, tilting his head and glancing back. “Why, we’ll be breaking out, of course!”

That line sealed the deal. After all, for all his soft edges, Will was a bad boy at heart, too.

It was dark out by the time they could put their plan into motion. The double moons were rising in the west, casting everything outside the range of the street lamps in a faint, pale light. They took a walk in the botany gardens after dinner, a fairly inconspicuous thing to do. Subconsciously, Jimmy noted that a few of the plants seemed wilted, white flecks spotting a few lower leaves, but he wasn’t a botanist and so made no comment. Will kept an eye on the teachers that patrolled the area while Jimmy made his way to a shadowy corner, the one place he knew of that the cameras wouldn’t see him. From there, he accessed the security system from his PADD - he’d been teaching himself programming since he was five, sitting in the back of his kindergarten classroom, it was a breeze to hack these types of systems - and ran a loop of camera feed. From there the two made their way to the chain link fence that surrounded the school.

The principal told them it was to keep wildlife out, since Tarsus had some rather nasty native predators. Of course, there was a hole in the fence that Jimmy had known about for a few weeks, and nothing had managed to get in, so he didn’t know the validity of that statement. The gap was barely big enough for him to squeeze through, scrawny as he was, but he’d kept it in the back of his mind in case he ever wanted to sneak out. There hadn’t been anything suspicious going on, so he’d had no reason to utilize it before this night. He was enjoying his classes, and had no reason to mess around. At, least, not until then.

Jimmy went through first. After making sure the coast was clear, Will forced his way out, too. The fencing groaned, and they both held their breath for a minute before determining no

one else had heard. After that, it was smooth sailing for the rest of their 'escape.' The fence opened up into a thick forest, a thriving mix of native and terran flora that formed a dense canopy and heavy shadows. They could still use the moonlight and their knowledge of direction to make their way towards the nearby town of New Franklin. The school they attended was fairly secluded, so their hike took nearly an hour. The principal and teachers, when asked, had said that the governor thought it important that students learn astronomy and botany and all types of things you couldn't study well in the city, so their school was the only thing this far out. They were surrounded by forests on one side, and a massive plain on the other, and as far as one could see there was no other sign of civilization. When he first got there, Jimmy had thought all the greenery was wonderful. Now he was starting to hate it, as he was slapped in the face by yet another palm frond-looking thing.

Eventually, pushing through the thick greenery native to Tarsus, Jimmy thought he could hear the murmur of human life. It was about time - they still had to consider the hour-long drive to and from the farmhouse, and he wanted to get a little bit of sleep that night. Their plan was to either hitch a ride from a kind stranger, an idea Jimmy wasn't a big fan of, or steal a vehicle, something Will didn't like - even though Jimmy had argued that they wouldn't really be stealing, they'd be borrowing with the intent to bring it back unscratched. That argument was part of why they'd gotten started so late, and now Tarsus' first moon was more than halfway through the sky. Its blue face watched them as they foraged on through the woods, unwavering and unyielding in its cold light.

They popped out on a paved road, the outlines of squat, wide-spread buildings against the tapestry of stars the only sign of civilization. There were next to no lights on, Jimmy noticed. No street lamps, or illuminated windows, or headlights. He'd have thought the town was dead, if not for the hum of generators he could still make out. A curfew, then? Why? Neither of them had any answers, but this did throw a wrench in both their transportation options. More so Will's favored plan than his own, though theft would be difficult to pull off too.

Well, there was no way around it. The two boys exchanged glances - neither had said a word their whole adventure other than to warn the other of a hole or tree branch, too scared of being heard and caught - and advanced towards the dead town. Jimmy knew more than enough about hotwiring to be able to steal most civilian vehicles, and Will had been driving aunt Josie's truck for the past year, so they were rather confident in their abilities. But that all depended on whether or not they would find something to steal.

The first couple of buildings they approached were barren. Jimmy could make out the muffled sound of human voices and movement behind the walls, but there were no vehicles other than a couple of rusting bikes parked out front. The first hovercar they saw was all black and parked in the middle of town square. The engine was still running, but no one was sitting inside the car. Jimmy made a mental note of it and kept creeping along, hoping for a less suspicious get-away vehicle. The next one they saw was sitting in front of a small house. The car itself had four wheels and more than a little bit of peeling paint, but it obviously hadn't been used in the past few hours. The house it was parked near, similarly, didn't show any signs of life. Neither Jimmy nor Will wanted to think very hard about that fact. Still, this was a better option, less likely to be noticed missing if they could get away quietly. Jimmy cracked his knuckles, gave his cousin a grin, and eased the driver's door open.

Since he'd been old enough to start developing his fine motor skills, Jimmy had been playing with wires. After years of self-guided learning, he could open a panel inside any car, four-wheeled or hovering, and get it running in under five minutes if it was a model from the past half-century. Thankfully, this one was. Another thing Jimmy was thankful for, he considered once the engine hummed to life, was that 23rd century cars were so much quieter than previous renditions. Not even the house a block over could hear it starting up. Will nudged his cousin over, crawling into the driver side and adjusting the seat to his liking.

"I'm still sticking by my argument that I could drive this puppy just as well as you," Jimmy grumbled from where he was buckling himself into the passenger seat.

Will ignored him, throwing the car into gear and ever-so-slowly crawling out of the driveway and onto the road. "How the hell am I supposed to navigate all the way home if I can't turn on the headlights?" he hissed, peering over the steering wheel in a way that didn't really give Jimmy much confidence in his abilities.

He sighed, hunching over the center console and pulling out more wires from Will didn't even know where. In between stripping colorful rubber with his teeth, Jimmy explained himself. "Most modern cars actually have the ability to display an active infrared view through the windshield - night vision. It's better than using the headlights, actually, but we humans are too attached to the way things have always been to use it. Manufacturers even got rid of the easy-access switch, but they never bothered to get rid of the tech itself. Lucky us." He spared a second to glance up at his cousin, grinning wildly, before twisting two bare wires together and clipping them to a circuit board. Jimmy considered how like his mother he looked in that second, and the excited expression faded almost as suddenly as it had appeared.

The windshield display flickered once, twice, before the pitch black landscape became visible in various shades of green and grey. The compass, temperature read out, and clock reappeared in their usual location (lining the top of the windshield, out of immediate eyeline), now a bright white against hunter green shadows.

Jimmy almost whoop-ed, catching himself at the last second and instead silently punched the air. "What're you waiting for, *Willy*?" He snickered, flopping back into his seat. Will grumbled something about 'cocky little nerds' and eased his way down the pavement, gradually making his way out the town at a pace that had both of them out of their minds with boredom before they'd even made it a mile.

It took a little over ninety minutes to get to aunt Josie's farmhouse. More often than either of them wanted to acknowledge, they'd pulled off the road and held their breaths, paranoid that they were being followed, only to laugh at themselves when no one showed up. Jimmy didn't voice the alternative - that they were being stalked, toyed with. Will was on edge enough as it were.

The lights were off when they pulled up. Neither were that worried - Aunt Josie had always been more of a morning person, after all. Her red pickup was still parked under the carport. As they walked up to the front door, Jimmy watched his cousin unwind, tension easing out of

his muscles. Will pushed the door open - again, not worrying, they lived far enough in the country to not bother with locks - and stepped into the kitchen. The house was silent. Jimmy followed, hands in his pockets but eyes darting around the heavily shadowed room.

Making their way deeper into the house, Will seemed to relax further and further while Jimmy felt the hairs on his neck stand up. Something felt off, but he couldn't put his finger on what exactly was wrong. It was a somewhat similar feeling to what he would get when Frank was about to come home, full of cheap liquor and anger he'd take out on Jimmy and Sam. The air felt stale in his lungs. At the end of the hallway, the door to Aunt Josie's bedroom was closed.

Will was smiling as he nudged the door open. He took a deep breath, ready to call out to his mom, ready to be reassured of her health and safety. The next second he was hunched over, hands clasped over his mouth and stomach heaving. The smell of decay overwhelmed them, and Jimmy finally identified what, exactly, was wrong.

Aunt Josie was laying on the ground near her bed, an archaic bullet hole through her chest. The light grey rug under her body was stained dark brown with old blood. While Will clung to the doorframe, fighting desperately to keep his dinner down, Jimmy stumbled forward to her side. He'd always heard that people were peaceful in death, but Aunt Josie looked as distraught as she'd been when he last saw her, through a school bus window, two weeks ago. Her body was breaking down, past rigor mortis and well along in the bloating process. Deep tan skin was now motley green. The stink of rotting meat and excrement and who knew what else was thick in the air, having been trapped in the room with her. Dark liquid covered the wood floor, leaking out from her body, more fluid than one would expect from a corpse. If he looked closely, which he tried not to, he could see the small movement of maggots and cadaverous bugs within her small wound and under the skin.

Saliva pooled in Jimmy's mouth and he turned away, stumbling out of the room before collapsing to his knees and retching. Will staggered after him, pale and sweating. Neither of them said a word for the longest time. Will was barely breathing, not making a sound as tears pooled in his eyes and ran, silently, down his cheeks.

"How long has she been dead?" he finally whispered, choking on the word.

Jimmy hated how his mind automatically went through the stages of decomposition, hated how for a split second he could objectively analyze how far along the body (his aunt, not the body, it was his *aunt* lying there) was. He was barely aware of his lips moving and the words coming out of his mouth. "It takes around eight days for discoloration to start. She's probably been... for over a week."

"Fuck."

It took another ten minutes for either of them to move. Jimmy pulled himself to his feet, dragged his cousin behind him, and made his way towards the front door. Will didn't make a sound as he was led along, eyes unfocused and staring into the distance. It was past midnight at this point, and Jimmy knew they had to get going if they wanted to avoid being caught out. As he passed the kitchen table, a stack of mail caught his attention and he grabbed them, curious, glancing over the words.

'In response to your request... Cannot supply more rations... Distress signal...'

Jimmy swallowed and stuffed the papers in his coat pocket without a second thought.

Will was still unresponsive when they reached the stolen car, and without a second thought Jimmy shoved him into the passenger seat before climbing behind the wheel. Driving this old thing couldn't be more difficult than the corvette, and this time he wasn't trying to run from Frank and the cops and Riverside. Jimmy didn't spare a second to glance in the rearview mirror as he pulled away from the farmhouse. If he did, he wouldn't have been able to leave.

It was only when they got close to town that Jimmy noticed they were being tailed. At first he thought it was a figment of his paranoid imagination. It was barely there, in the corner of his eye, and his cousin was of no help in differentiating real from fabricated. Will hadn't spoken a word since the farmhouse. Jimmy stepped on the gas a hair and fixed his eyes on the road in front of him, ignoring the tingling in the back of his mind.

Jimmy pulled off on the side of the road and stared out the back window. He'd seen it again, bigger and more obvious. He was 85% sure there really was something out there, in the black of Tarsus night. Either way, he wasn't too keen on getting caught, so they would be legging it through the woods the rest of the way back. He hopped out of the car and led Will behind him into the dense forest. He'd finally started responding when Jimmy asked him questions, and could see his surroundings well enough to avoid low hanging branches.

"Come on, we've got to go, they're behind us Will, we've got to hide," Jimmy panted in his cousin's ear. They were making far too much noise, stepping on twigs and getting slapped by branches. He just hoped they could get far enough ahead of the people stalking them, out of hearing range and back to school before sunrise.

Just as the thought crossed his mind, he heard boots stomping through the undergrowth after them. "Hey! Where'd you go? You know the punishment for breaking curfew, it'll hurt less if you just stop running!" The overt threat of pain and punishment sent a chill down Jimmy's spine and he couldn't let himself get lost in memories of Frank, he had to get his cousin back to safety. He grit his teeth and made a conscious effort to be quieter, shushed Will when he spat a curse at a vine that tangled around his leg but it was too late. Bright flashlight beams cut through the greenery and into Will's face and shouts filled the air.

Then they are running through the woods, abandoning all hope at subtlety and there are crashing footsteps behind them, the high pitched whine of phaser blasts and deep voices calling out promises of pain, and -

Will trips over a branch, twists his ankle, and Jimmy hauls his cousin up and behind him. He's limping and leaning heavily on the younger boy but Jimmy clings tight to him. He won't lose more of his family, he won't, not after Sam, he can help Will, it's not too much further to the fence and if they can just lose these guards they'll be fine.

Gunshots and phaser fire follow them, sinking into tree trunks in their wake, cutting through leaves and then they hit something definitively not wood and Will is screaming, crying,

begging Jimmy to stop but he's bleeding out all over Jimmy and it's too much, too much, he can't make it stop please make it stop! There's a hole in his stomach, gaping in what little moonlight is filtering through the tree branches. Hot blood is burning his hands, his face, and he can't put enough pressure on the wound while trying to run and he can't stop running or they're both dead. They're both so, so dead.

Will is clawing at Jimmy's hand and at first he grips it tight, trying to take some of the pain from his cousin, but he's being slapped and Will is glaring at him with as much strength as he can muster, though it's fading fast. Jimmy has never seen so much fire in those brown eyes until now. He's wheezing, but he can force out a mouthful of words. "Leave me, Jimmy. You gotta get out of here." The men are gaining on them and they don't have much time left. Will lets himself go limp, still staring at Jimmy, shrugging out of his hold and collapsing onto the ground. He shoves him once, for good measure, when Jimmy stops moving. "Go!" Will shouts, the force of his words making blood spew from his paling lips.

Jimmy runs. He runs, and doesn't look back.

Punishment

Chapter Summary

Jimmy should've known better than to think he'd gotten away with everything so easily. Not long after the events of last chapter, the school gets a guest visitor, and everything goes to shit.

Chapter Notes

Here we go, chapter 2 posted! I hope you guys appreciate being introduced to all my OC's, and few familiar faces, in this chapter. Next one will hopefully be up in not too long. We'll see!

Tarsus was the closest thing to a safe haven Jimmy had ever had, at least since Winona went back into the black. When he first got there, he'd been screaming into the void for so long he didn't know what it felt like to be heard. Aunt Josie had heard him. Will had heard him. They'd heard when he slacked off at school, but stayed up all night reading university textbooks. They'd heard when he side stepped hugs and pats on the back, when he fell asleep on the couch curled up in a ball so tight they couldn't unwind him. They'd heard when he woke up in a cold sweat, face wet with tears he'd shed in his sleep and throat sore from holding in his cries. Aunt Josie had been there to pick him up from school, one week after landing there, bloodied and bruised and wearing a feral smile, had been there when the blood was washed off and Jimmy was wrapping his tender wrist with rehearsed motions. Will had listened when he had his first breakdown in the barn, sobbing and screaming and clawing and so, so *afraid* of being sent back to Earth.

Now Jimmy was there to hear Aunt Josie and Will begging him to save them. To smell Aunt Josie's putrefied corpse. To feel Will's blood burn his hands. To hear their voices rise in a cacophony, whispering, yelling, screaming his name, why couldn't he help them, why couldn't he have been smarter and thought harder and seen sooner -

An incessant, tinny beeping filled Jimmy's ear. From where he was lying prone on his bed, he could just barely slap the screen of his PADD and shut off the alarm. Another night gone, and he hadn't gotten any more sleep. His body was wrung out, eyelids heavy, head stuffed with cotton. He blinked, and in the momentary darkness he saw brown eyes staring back at him, the same eyes he'd been seeing for the past six day without fail.

Jimmy gasped and sat upright, rubbing exhaustion out of his eyes. Starbursts filled his vision, a welcome reprieve from the constant nightmares. It had been almost a week, and he could barely function. The time in between classes had been tense, adults keeping close eyes on children and more detentions being handed out than ever before. None of the teachers had mentioned Will's disappearance, but the student body had been whispering non-stop since Sunday. Jimmy, for his part, had stayed stone-faced and silent. He was barely ever seen outside of class, and even there he wasn't truly present. Everyone knew something bad had happened, but their theories about freak accidents and fights didn't compare to what Jimmy knew was the truth. The truth...

He cast his eyes towards the secret drawer he had previously built into his desk. Beneath a false bottom, he had stashed the papers from Aunt Josie's house. Papers he read, religiously, every night, the words burned into his frontal cortex.

'It is our regret to inform you that we cannot supply extra rations to someone of your class. As previously stated, your delivery date is slated for two weeks from the time of writing this letter. Continued pressing of this matter may result in a decrease in rations or a delay in delivery...'

What the fuck did that mean? Jimmy made his way through the motions of getting ready for another day of classes he wouldn't pay attention to, pulling on the dull grey uniform they'd been forced to adopt weeks ago. There had been few signs of food rationing at the boarding school, as far as Jimmy was aware. Their three square meals a day were bland, sure, smaller than they'd been at the beginning of the semester and the milk tasted more watered down than what they used to drink on the farm, but they still *ate*. Despite the evidence that stared back at him from his caf tray, Jimmy couldn't ignore his Aunt's letters. The alternative, that she and Will had died due to plain old bad luck, wasn't something he would entertain.

Before this week, he had been resolutely focused on his classes. He was a thirteen year old boy taking high school- and college-level courses about every subject under the sun. The only students who could keep up with him were five years his senior, or Vulcans. He'd been involved with actual, bonafide research, and hadn't had a reason to look outside of the bubble he lived in. For the past five days, though, he hadn't done an ounce of homework. In classes, Jimmy would stare at his PADD until the teacher had to take it away, after which he would stare blankly at the wall. Outside of the classroom he tried to sub route the firewalls of the school network, tried to hack into the government archives from the library computer, tried to prove to himself that something really was going on beyond their chain link fence.

What little he did find wasn't promising: Colony-wide curfews. Resource rationing. Loss of inter-planetary satellites. Class segregation. A fungus. None of it made any sense - how hadn't he ever heard anything about this? The first notice he could find was dated to more than a month and a half ago, almost as long as he'd been living at school. His aunt hadn't even said a word to him. Jimmy threw his bag over his shoulder and left his room, trying and failing to leave his paranoia alone.

His PADD beeped from beside his breakfast plate. The cafeteria was filled with identical beeping as every student's PADD lit up.

'All students to report to flag field for assembly at 0830'

It was 0825.

Jimmy barely made it before the speaking started. Slipping into the back of the crowd, he sized up the adults standing before the school; the principle, his dark brown dome sweating profusely under the summer Tarsus star, and beside him, a tall, pale human. He was fairly handsome, Jimmy observed, for an older man. His nose was slightly bigger than average, and his reddish-brown facial hair was meticulously styled. He was flanked by two guards dressed in all black, who were glaring into the crowd and ghosting their fingers over their belt holsters.

Having finally been satisfied by the number of students before them, the principle stepped forward and addressed the crowd through a microphone.

“Alright kids, I’ve got a very special guest who wants to say a few words to you all. Please give a warm welcome to Governor Kodos, from all the way in the capitol!” Students began a lackluster applause that petered out before it had even truly begun. The Drayan shuffled aside and made space for the Governor.

Kodos cleared his throat. ‘Thank you very much, Principle Kingsley. I must say I am pleased to see all you bright young children here before me. You remind me of why I do the things I do. Things such as what I must do now. We must talk about a grave, criminal matter.’

Jimmy’s blood froze in his veins as Kodos glanced into the crowd, eyes magnetically drawn to Jimmy’s crystal blues.

“On Saturday, two of your peers snuck off school grounds, hotwired and stole a vehicle, and drove without license 100 miles to do god-knows-what. Then they tried to run from authority when they were caught out. One was apprehended, and has been *dealt with*, but the other has been residing among you. A wolf in your midst, my little lambs. Nevertheless, we have finally recovered security footage of the criminal. He will be punished, publicly, as an example.”

He glared into the crowd, eyes alight with a manic fire that hadn’t been there seconds ago. “There is nothing for you outside of that fence. So long as you stay here and behave, there is nothing to fear. When one breaks the rules, one is punished. When two break the rules, EVERYONE is punished.

“James Tiberius Kirk, please come to the front of the class for your punishment.”

On numb legs, Jimmy stumbled forward, the crowd parting and classmates staring at him, eyes wide but not really surprised. Somehow he’d been caught on camera during the week, when he’d been slipping through the fence at night to stash granola bars and apples he didn’t eat in the woods, preparing for the worst. This, being caught and called out publicly, was just about the worst.

Up on stage next to Kodos, Jimmy couldn’t meet the man’s eye. “I have a question for you, James.” He reached down and tapped Jimmy’s chin, forcing his head up. “Did you really think I

wouldn't hunt you down?"

He could bring himself to respond.

Satisfied, the man turned back to his audience. One hand was flung out, making a wide gesture, while the other reached towards his waistband. Jimmy's stomach dropped out from under him.

"James, here, has committed an egregious crime against the colony. Not only that, but a crime which, if it goes unpunished, could lead others to follow in his wake. It is for this reason that James must be disciplined strongly, swiftly, and publicly.

"Your continued existence represents a threat to the well-being of society. Your life means slow death to the more valued members of the colony. Therefore, I have no alternative than to sentence you to die. Your execution is so ordered, signed Arthur Kodos, Governor of Tarsus IV." An antique pistol was pulled from a concealed holster on Kodos' hip, and pointed high in the sky. He brought his arm down slowly, taking his sweet time until the barrel was centimeters away from Jimmy's forehead. He let out a deep sigh, shoulders falling back, and tilted his head a few degrees to the side.

"I wish it didn't have to be this way, James. You would have been such a good son."

His finger shifted to the trigger. Jimmy held his breath, going cross-eyed staring down the barrel of a gun. Though his attention was fixated on the weapon aimed at him, in his peripheral vision he was a small rock glided into his field of view.

His heart slammed against his sternum. Everything felt like hyper-focused slow motion, the images crystal clear. The stone, red like the dirt of Tarsus, the blood of the people murdered for the sake of the colony, Jimmy mused. Ironic. It connected to the back of Kodos' hand the second before the man pulled the trigger, aim going far wide, gun firing with a deafening thud, gunpowder and smoke filling the air and Jimmy's entire body going white-hot with pain.

A cry fell from Jimmy's lips as he staggered backwards, right hand shooting up to clasp at his left bicep. The muscle shivered, palm already getting slick with blood. His ears are ringing and he can't hear anything but the thump of his pulse. Kodos was blinking, as taken aback as Jimmy was, eyes flickering between the gun in his hand, the rock on the ground at his feet, and Jimmy. Momentarily brushing off the shock, Jimmy took a few unbalanced steps back into Kodos' face, pulled his lips back in a snarl, and swung at the Governor with as much force as he could muster.

His knuckles twinged with pain as he stumbled to the side, follow-through tugging his adrenaline-filled body almost off the stage. Suddenly sound rushed back in and Jimmy could hear the uproar coming from behind him. The student body was screaming. They were all horrified by the actions almost taken in front of them. A few began to charge the stage, eyes ablaze and ready for an altercation. The next second Kodos' guards are firing their phasers into the crowd and small, prepubescent bodies hit the ground. Anarchy falls faster than anyone expected.

In the immediate swarming that followed the first deaths, Jimmy was able to get away from the gun fire. His arm burned still, but he did his best to block out the pain. He had enough experience with that, and could function until he got to safety. If they stayed long enough for the guards to regain control, they would all be executed. *When two break the rules, everyone is punished.*

He doesn't think as he runs, just grabs every arm he can and breaks for it. He can't reach nearly as many kids as he wishes he could. It was chaos on the field at that point. Grass was trampled and soaked with the blood of dead children. Jimmy stepped on a hand and heard bones snap, but no voicing of pain. He didn't look down.

"Go, go, come on, keep going into the woods, I'll catch up, go!" Jimmy pushed a small body through the hole in the fence. His hands, both covered in blood, jerked back at the chain and held the gap open. Children squeezed through, one after the other, faces etched with fear and some wearing the blood of their classmates. Lifting his head, Jimmy made eye contact with one of the few older kids he'd been able to grab and drag along with him. Thomas Leighton, two years older than Jimmy but in some of his classes. Well. He HAD been in some of his classes. It wasn't looking like that trend was going to continue.

Thomas met Jimmy's eye and nodded. "I'll lead them into the woods, straight west a few kilos. You don't catch up to us in thirty minutes, I'll keep moving."

Jimmy nodded back, giving the last of the children a nudge forward when an Orion's shirt snagged on wire. "There's a pile of rocks about a kilometer southwest, I stashed some food and gear there. It's not much, but it'll help."

"You knew this was going to happen?"

"I had a gut feeling. Didn't want to believe it."

A few seconds passed, silence filled with shouting and crying.

"Good luck, Kirk."

Jimmy left Thomas to wrangle the children they'd managed to grab in the chaos, turned and dove back into the fray. Both guards and students were still exchanging blows, but the bodies were stacking up quickly. In the insanity of it all, Jimmy was able to pull three more to safety - two Vulcans, who were clinging to each other, and a little human boy. He tried to go back again, save more kids, but on the other side of the field more guards were pouring in, armed to the teeth. He had to leave, right then, if he wanted to keep the last three kids alive.

They all squirmed through the fence, Jimmy wincing as his scalp was scraped and a few hairs were pulled out. When he stood back up, there were six eyes staring at him, tracing his every move.

"Alright, you guys better keep up. Let's go."

They caught up with Thomas. So many of the kids were small, scared, and tired. He, along with the three other oldest, had taken to carrying the youngest in order to keep moving. The one on his back had introduced himself as Kevin. A duffle bag was slung over his shoulder, rhythmically thumping against his upper thigh. The burning in his arm had grown into an all-encompassing fire, then died down to an ember embedded in his skin. He'd taken a brief break to wrap it, using a strip torn from the bottom of his shirt, before picking Kevin back up and continuing. Still they pushed onward, barely able to see in pitch-black night. The only noise they'd been hearing for the past hour had been the murmuring, groaning calls of Tarsus' insects.

To his left, Thomas tripped, crashing down hard and loud to his knees. The kid on his back, a small human, tumbled into the leaf litter as well. Neither of them got up for a long minute, exhausted to the bone. Considering their surroundings, Jimmy sighed and let the boy on his own back slide off to the ground.

"I'm beat," he murmured. His voice sounded too-loud in the quiet wilderness. He shook off lingering paranoia and kept talking.

"I think we should take a break for the night, get some rest. We can keep moving in the morning, try to find somewhere safe to set up a camp or something. Does that sound good to everyone?"

Sighs of relief rose around him as, one by one, his group sprawled out. The lighting was dim, at best, but he could see some pairs of kids clinging to each other for dear life.

He sat down and unzipped his bag, pulling out a few granola bars and distributing them. "Alright, everyone gather here, split a bar with someone. We've only got so much food."

Once all the kids had food, he spoke up again. "My name is James. I'm sure you all already know that, given... everything. You can call me..." Everyone at school had called him Jimmy. Aunt Josie and Will had called him Jimmy. "JT, I guess."

"I'm Natalie Summers," said the curly haired girl who had sat beside him. "I'm fourteen."

That kicked off the cycle of introductions. They all went around their wonky circle, stating their names and ages. Thomas Leighton, age fifteen, JT already knew. Similarly, finally able to see faces of the kids he'd been walking with, he recognized his cousin Sarah. 'Peter, 15' was the other oldest kid there, a human boy with dark skin and hair. Ten-year-old Callisto Rogers was tall and lanky, with a mop of brown hair and freckles. T'lak and V'leris were Vulcan siblings, 12 and 11 respectively, both somber-faced with matching brown eyes. The third Vulcan in their little group was T'raya, only seven years old, not yet adept enough to hide the fear in her tightly-drawn lips. Elina Wiles was seven as well (seven-and-a-half, thank you, she'd said), and was still waiting for a front tooth to grow in. Mitchel Kingsley was big for a ten year old, tall and very much so soft around the edges. Contrarily, Luca Gibbs was small for their eleven years, their scrawny build exaggerated by the hunch in their shoulders. Reyceh was the only Orion of the bunch, and his dark hair and green skin stood out starkly from the other mostly-human group. That left the two youngest children - Kevin Riley and

Davis Baron, both five, clinging to each other like their lives depended on it at that moment. Fifteen children, between five and fifteen. All that was left of their school, for all they knew. They could survive until help came.

To his left, Natalie spoke up. “We can’t let our guard down yet. Someone should stay awake, watch out for guards or predators. We can sleep in shifts.” At JT’s incredulous look, the girl shrugged. “What? I saw it in a movie. Sounds like a good idea.”

So they did. Everyone settled in for the night, curling up together to conserve heat as the ground leached their warmth. The fourteen-year-old volunteered to take first watch. Once just about all of them were asleep, JT went and sat next to her.

Neither of them said a word, but there was no shift change that night. They sat together,
.watched the sun rise, and woke the rest of the camp

Consequences

Chapter Summary

JT and his kids try to keep living, in spite of all the challenges of survival. After the death of a child, JT must make the difficult decision to return to civilization for necessary resources

Chapter Notes

Just a reminder, this fic is tagged with child death, consider this an additional warning about this chapter.

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

Their first attempt at survival was, in one word, shitty. All but the youngest were too paranoid to stop walking for the first few days, even with their weak, shaking legs and the shooting pain of hunger gnawing at their stomachs. They walked beside a river they'd found on their first day, wading in the water when it got too hot to bear in midday. Every hour, without fail, one of the kids would start sniffing and muffling sobs. No one bothered comforting them. They couldn't find the energy to lie and make empty promises.

It took two days for them to feel comfortable enough to even consider setting up a campsite, and another half a day to find somewhere to actually *use* as a campsite. In the end, they decided on a flat, heavily-wooded spot along the edge of a lake. One of the older kids, T'lak, had suggested it - "It is logical to remain near water, and the lake also offers a wider range of sight." JT had been too exhausted to think of a counter argument at that point, and even if he could, they wouldn't have been able to make it much further. A simple glance around their group could tell him that no one had been sleeping well. They didn't really have much of a choice at that point, did they?

Surviving was *hard*. Far too often, they would go to bed hungry, JT's stash of food long since drained. They tried catching the wildlife that lived around them, but none of them knew how to build a trap. They'd dulled one of their three knives trying to throw it at a squirrel-like rodent, and quickly abandoned that tactic as well. Tommy and Peter would go out to the pond at sunrise, wade in up to their knees, and try to fish using strings they'd pulled from their fraying shirts and grubs Kevin liked to dig up. By the evening, when everyone gathered around their miniscule campfire, sunburnt and exhausted, they might have five fish. Five fish,

from a full days worth of trying, that the three Vulcan kids could barely bring themselves to look at. They weren't even big.

Foraging for food had gone a bit better, in the beginning. There were plenty of berry bushes and weird nuts for them to choose from. For the most part, they could fill the duffle bag with fruits and leafy greens and most of it was edible - Luca had taken classes on native Tarsus flora and fauna, so they could identify a good handful of the local plants. Sooner rather than later, though, they'd overpicked everything nearby, and they had to start pushing further and further out. Despite his best efforts, their clothes hung off their frames, their skin lost color, and their muscles ached and atrophied day by day. And no matter how many shitty, bland leaves he picked, Kevin and Davis and *everyone* was going to sleep with an aching stomach.

It wasn't enough.

They lost their first only one month after running. One month after escaping what would have been a slaughter. One month of surviving, living, distancing themselves from the trauma, convincing themselves it wasn't real. It was JT's fault.

He'd been tasked with watching out for the kids that day. They liked to rotate shifts, cycle between collecting firewood and failing to hunt and foraging for food and watching over the little ones. That day, it was JT's turn. He was supposed to entertain Kevin, Davis, Elina, Reyceh, and T'raya. Honestly, JT usually liked this shift. He loved the kids, loved tumbling around in the dirt and answering their every question.

Kevin would turn over rocks bigger than his head and giggle as the worms squirmed under foreign sunlight. Elina liked to sit in a sunny clearing by the shore, picking grass and braiding it into a long rope that she'd tuck behind her ear and pretend it was her own hair. They'd had to cut all of hers off weeks ago, when she'd gotten stuck in a wall of brambles and almost scalped herself trying to get out. Davis preferred crawling around on his belly next to nearby berry bushes, sometimes picking almost-ripe fruits and popping them into his mouth. Reyceh, more often than not, would stick within the circle of lean-tos they'd built, drawing in the ash pit, singing in Orion. Without fail, T'raya would glue herself to JT's hip and pepper him with questions - "what type of bug is that?" and "How deep is the lake?" and "Approximately how many calories are in a purpleberry?" (purpleberries were what they called one of the native fruits, due to the violet hue of it's skin. It tasted a bit like a cross between a blueberry and orange peel, and it was edible, but that was the extent of JT's knowledge on the subject). Sometimes, when the kids tired themselves out, which happened earlier and earlier the longer they were stuck out in the woods, JT would get them to gather around him in the camp and he'd tell them stories about princesses and knights, or about daring starship captains. The same types of stories Sam used to tell him back when he was a kid and his brother was still around. Those were his favorite moments.

That specific day, though, the day they lost their first kid, JT didn't feel much like answering questions or telling stories. Nothing particularly bad had even happened, but he'd been feeling faint and nauseous from the moment he woke up. As per usual, Kevin and Davis were whining in his ear, complaining about being hungry. Most days JT could handle it. That day, he just. Couldn't.

“If you’re so damn hungry, you don’t you eat your stupid grubs!” he snapped. The boys shrank back, surprised and scared by JT’s outburst. Kevin got wet-eyed and blubbery, throwing himself onto the ground at JT’s feet and began to bawl. Davis, on the other hand, turned tail and ran towards the purpleberry bush. JT left them both to tire themselves out, sitting on a stump and rubbing his forehead and ignoring T’raya where she was tugging at his shirt hem and asking, asking, asking.

“Jay! JT, come here! Quick, it’s Davis!”

He’d only closed his eyes for a second, but when he peeled them open again it was nearing dusk. Eyes darting around, he counted the kids he’d been responsible for. Kevin, T’raya, Reyceh, and Elina were all near the fire, helping Tommy and Peter gut their catch. Jerking his head around, he saw Natalie kneeling next to Davis’ bush. *Davis.*

JT’s breath caught in his throat. She was leaning over a prone body, so small and weak. He didn’t think before throwing himself forward, vision going spotty and white for a second and head too-light and oxygen deprived. He felt for a pulse in Davis’ neck. It was weak, barely pushing blood. Yellow bile stained the boy’s chin and t-shirt. His hands were balled into fists at his sides. He didn’t respond when JT called his name, yelled it, shook him hard enough that his teeth clattered together. Peter came running up behind him, kneeled down and tried to help. Nothing they did made a difference.

When his pulse faded into the background, JT didn’t hesitate to throw himself into chest compressions. His bullet wound, finally having grown fresh scar tissue, throbbed from the effort. The crack of ribs echoed in the back of his mind and he slammed down over, and over, and over, ignoring the hands pulling at him, the soft words, the tears running down his face. He didn’t stop when Natalie slapped him, snapped “He’s dead, JT,” didn’t stop when his arms started to burn. The body under his hands was cold and limp but he couldn’t stop, he couldn’t give up, he had to save him, it was his job, how could he have *done this* what did he *do*.

Tommy came up behind him without saying a word. Just wrapped his arm around JT’s shoulders. Held him when he stopped his compressions and turned, buried his face in Tommy’s chest and *screamed*. Neither of them spoke as JT picked up Davis’ body and lurched to his feet, carrying the limp body to the edge of the camp to protect him from scavengers. Tom led JT back to the campfire after and sat him down, pushed a plate of fish into his hands. The meat sank like lead in his stomach. Little Kevin came over and tried to crawl into his lap, like he did every night, wanting to be held and rocked like nothing mattered, but JT’s muscles seized and he pulled his knees up against his chest, buried his face so Kev couldn’t see the tears leaking out.

Tommy put the littles ones to bed. Older kids stayed out around the fire, silent, watching embers drifting up in the breezing coming off the water. Outside the ring of light they could hear nocturnal animals scuffling up leaf litter, scavenging for anything they hadn’t already foraged. A few eyes flicked to the body a few yards away. No one said a word, and the logs on fire crackled.

“So.” T’lak, ever blunt, broke the silence. There were seven kids still sitting up - everyone older than ten (JT, Thomas, Peter, Natalie, Luca, T’lak, V’leris). All but JT and Thomas jerked their heads up.

Her eyebrows pinched minutely, a shift only noticeable due to weeks of close quarters, and she continued. "We have to address what happened today. Davis has died, partially due to negligence. This is not," she spoke over the few cries in JT's defence, "a declaration of blame for anyone. We all knew Davis would wander out of our sight at times, and we have all been growing weaker and weaker. However, we must accept that if we continue living the way we are, it is likely that more of us will die."

Quiet settled over them again as her words sank in. "She's right," JT said, throat twinging and hoarse. He cleared his throat. "What we're doing right now isn't sustainable. It's only been a month, who knows how long it's going to take to get help. Who knows if help will even come at all. We're going to have to make changes if we want to survive much longer."

"I know, what happened is my fault. And I'm going to do whatever I can to keep the rest of us alive, ok?"

Natalie spoke next. "We need to try hunting again. I know there are ways to build traps, at least for smaller animals. And if we could get some sort of long distance weapon, we might have a chance at taking down some bigger prey."

"If we are able to kill an animal, you Vulcans need to put aside culture and eat it," Peter followed.

T'lak and V'leris both nodded, though their mouths threatened to pull down into twin frowns.

"Maybe we can try net fishing, too," Tommy piped up. "We can try to make something out of the natural fibers here. There are lots of small fish in the shallows too shy to go for our bait, but a net or cage might work. It's worth a shot."

For a few minutes they traded ideas back and forth, but there was one common thread.

"All of your ideas are great, but they'll take time to perfect. We need an immediate solution," JT pointed out. All eyes rounded on him. He swallowed.

"JT, I'm going to repeat myself. This is a stupid idea," Peter grumbled. He and JT were creeping through the forest, a good day's walk away from their camp at this point. The sunset behind them cast reds and oranges and pinks on the leaves around them, but shadows were also beginning to stretch as night fell.

"You didn't have to come with," he snapped back under his breath. They were on their way to town (or at least, JT *hoped* they were. Directions were hard). It had been all his idea - sneak into town, steal food and supplies and whatever they could get their hands on. Peter was there because he was strong and good at planning, JT was there because he was quick and nimble and experienced in petty theft and it was his fault Davis died and- well, he had a lot of reasons to be there, in any case.

It had taken longer than expected to reach town, and the night was just about upon them. The town, Red Rock, was just as dead as it had been a month ago, when JT and Will had stolen that car. His brain stuttered for a second thinking about his cousin, about the end he had met. Peter nudged him, breaking him out of his looping thoughts.

They made eye contact, nodded, and crept up to the tree line.

Lights were off in the houses and few businesses were still standing. Many of the buildings were burnt husks, charred and collapsed in on themselves. The smell of smoke lingered in the air. The structures that remained standing didn't seem to be faring much better, either, windows boarded up and lawns little more than patches of dirt and dead grass. Vehicles with flat tires and shattered windshields littered the streets.

A flyer drifted in the faint breeze, flipping over in the air a few times before JT snatched it up. *'Town hall meeting, 1600, attendance mandatory. Food provided.'* It was dated to a week ago. Something electric danced up JT's spine and unease settled below his lungs.

"Stay low and on guard," he hissed to Peter. The taller boy set his jaw and nodded, falling in a step behind JT. Red Rock was silent, stale and full of static. JT swallowed down his discomfort and let himself into a house on the edge of town.

At first glance, the interior didn't seem amiss. They entered into the kitchen, and all four chairs were pushed neatly into the table. Cookbooks lined a shelf on the wall, and an arrangement of silk flowers covered in dust sat on the entry table. Then JT realized everything was covered in dust. Looking through the cabinets, neither he nor Peter found a scrap of food. The most they had to bring back to camp was a half-full bag of rice infested with some sort of bug larvae and a suspiciously colored mold. The tingle in JT's ribcage told him to leave the grains behind, that they would be better off hungry than eating it. That didn't stop Peter from stowing the bag in his worn duffle.

The rest of the house was equally disappointing. They were able to scrounge up a few thin sheets, a nearly empty bobbin of thread, an expired tube of antibiotic cream, and an old cast iron pan. In his exploration of the remainder of the house, JT made a discovery that turned his stomach and that he resolutely kept Peter from seeing. There was a nursery in the back of the house. Evidently, the owners of the house hadn't thought to bring their infant along to the town meeting. No one had been back to the house in a week. JT closed the door behind himself after scrounging up a couple cloth diapers and tried to pretend his eyes were tearing up from mourning an unknown child, rather than the way the familiar stench burned his nostrils.

They moved onto the next house. This one, JT had to pick the lock on the back door, and when he eased it open in was obvious that the town wasn't completely abandoned. In the mud room, where they entered from, a few pairs of dirt-crusting boots were lined up along the wall, and a pile of slightly damp laundry sat in a basket, waiting to be hung on a clothesline. Peter grabbed JT's wrist before he could move forward and into the rest of the house, eyes wide and jaw clenched shut. He gave a short, harsh shake of his head. JT heaved out a silent breath, nodding in agreement. He still grabbed a few pieces of clothing off the top of the pile, and the smallest pair of work boots, before they left out the door they came in. On to the next house, where they'd hopefully find something more useful.

At the end of the night, JT and Peter ran into a dilemma. They only had two bags between them, JT's old and scrappy duffle and a shoddily-made sack from someone's old T-shirt. No one had really thought about how much they would find in Red Rock, and how they would carry their loot back through the woods to the camp. It was one of the many parts of their plan that had been glossed over, and JT was beginning to thoroughly regret it. As they'd made their way around the edge of the town, breaking into the more worn down and abandoned-looking houses, they'd acquired quite a large sum of items that they would need to transport back to camp. Only issue was, they didn't have a way to move it all.

"Maybe we can wear all the clothes?" Peter offered, voice barely a whisper, once they had sequestered themselves away in a half burnt down house for the night. It wasn't the safest place to be, but their only other option was the woods, and neither of them quite wanted to be on lookout for the predators that lurked in the dark. Better to watch for other humans, who at least were predictable in their violence.

JT eyed the pile of things they'd acquired over the past few hours. It wasn't anything to brag home about, mostly expired grains and random pieces of fabric that he'd thought Reyceh or Luca might be able to sew with. Still, while their loot wasn't impressive, it flowed over the seams of their measly two bags. It would be hard to carry it all back to camp, and if they found themselves being pursued by anything? JT couldn't imagine it would turn out well.

"Worth a shot." he finally responded, riffling through the fabric before him and pulling a sweater over his head.

"Pete, how about I take first watch? Get some shut eye, I'll wake you in three hours to swap ."

"Ugh, fine. But you better actually swap with me this time, I can't have you lagging on the return trip tomorrow."

"It was *one time*, dude, can't you just forget it?"

"Ha, you wish, JT."

Peter laid his head on a bunched up sweater, eyes falling shut but muscles still tense. It took almost half an hour before JT saw his jaw relax and his breathing evened out. JT leaned against the concrete wall behind him, a knife clenched in one fist, bright eyes darting between the few windows he could see out of. The silence was perforated only by Peter's occasional sigh.

It was nearing one in the morning when movement out the East window caught JT's eye. He squinted, waiting for something else to happen. The hair on the nape of his neck stood up. He heard gravel crunching under boots in the distance.

“Peter. Get up, we’ve got company.” He rested one hand on Peter’s shoulder. The contact was enough to bring the other boy to wakefulness in a few seconds. Their eyes met, and in the light offered by two waning moons, Peter saw a manic energy in JT. Without another word, the two grabbed their bags and crouched underneath one of the windows, barely breathing, ears straining, trying to hear which direction they were coming from. It was a small party, under ten people if JT could trust his hearing, moving away from them. Moving towards the part of Red Rock that was still occupied. They waited five devastatingly slow minutes before daring to move, crawling towards the only exit.

Once they got out, it was a straight shot to the edge of the woods. Just a few hundred feet. This time around, JT knew how to navigate the woods and lose a tail. He wouldn’t get Peter killed like he did Will.

JT shook his head. He didn’t have the time to be thinking about things he could have done better. Off in the distance, he heard a fist pounding on wood, a voice calling out for the residents to ‘open up.’ This was their window of time, narrow and quickly passing them by. With a glance and a furrowing of his brow, Peter and JT communicated their intentions. The older boy’s hand flicked out, five fingers splayed, now four, now three...

They took off at just under a sprint, footfalls light and breaths muffled. It was almost too easy to reach the woods. JT risked a glance back at the town.

There was a cluster of ten people, all large and dressed head to toe in black, standing in front of the house he had stolen boots from. The door was open, and a young woman was speaking in hushed tones with the apparently leader of the strange group. A man stood next to her, equally as frazzled, gesturing in a calming manner. The leader said something and the young couple froze. The woman tried to speak but was hushed by her partner. The leader turned and began to walk away from them. For a second JT thought that was the end of it, and almost turned back to Peter.

One of the people dressed in black pulled something from their hip. The young woman's scream was cut off abruptly by two short bursts of energy. JT finally turned and started into the woods, Peter trailing behind him as they did their best to avoid fallen branches. Neither said a word until Tarsus’ star rose in the morning.

The rest of camp was ecstatic to see JT and Peter returned, laden down with luxuries none of them had seen in over a month. Kevin rushed them, grinning wide, showing off a new gap between his teeth when JT scooped him up into his arms. Thomas and Natalie immediately began digging through what they had brought back, sorting it out and occasionally muttering to the other about what they found. Elina and Reyceh latched onto Peter’s legs and wouldn’t stop exclaiming about how glad they were that the two had made it back safe, while T’raya grabbed a fistful of JT’s shirt and refused to let go. T’lak and V’leris nodded their greetings from where they were sitting, stoking the campfire. JT was glad to be back with his kids.

As they all settled down around the fire pit and shared a skillet full of cornmeal mush, the little ones smiling around mouthfuls of food, older kids savoring the texture of real (or real enough) food, everyone thanking Peter and JT over and over, a realization struck him. There

was going to be next time. Sooner or later, JT would be making the same day-long trek through the woods to Red Rock, pilching parcels of food and swatches of fabric from the houses of people suffering a similar fate to theirs, if only to see this excitement and livelihood in the camp again.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed this chapter! I know it was a bit heavy, but that's the tone for this whole fic onward, so buckle up. If you liked this, or didn't like it, or have anything you want to talk to me about, feel free to drop a comment or reach out to me on tumblr @megmachine! Please leave a kudos if you want to read more of this, your love and support really mean the world to me. Stay safe and healthy, everyone!

Reminder

Chapter Summary

This chapter contains a non-explicit but implied rape scene. Summary and further trigger warnings in the end notes

When things feel too good to be true, they usually are. JT and Peter find a reliable source of food for the group, but pride is a deadly sin for a reason.

Chapter Notes

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

They'd been wandering through these new woods for a few hours. Peter's feet were sore and coated in mud, and JT's weren't faring much better. The stone dagger in his hands was warm - he hadn't sheathed it since they saw their second Tiger-Lizard, he wasn't willing to take any risks where they still weren't familiar with their surroundings. The star started edging closer and closer to the horizon, and JT knew they should start setting up camp for the night before it got truly dark. Something in his gut told him to push on just a little longer, just a little further. Ignoring the annoyed sigh from Peter's direction, JT pushed through another thick wall of brush.

Sounds began filtering up from the slight valley below them. Like the woodland rodents chattering to each other, and the large tree-grazers pushing over and stepping on saplings, and the growl of a bear. JT's brow crinkled and he squinted. There, through a small gap in the leaves, he saw a flicker of movement. It was still too far away for him to know what, exactly, it was, but if he just got a little bit closer...

Suddenly he was pushing aside a branch and staring down a vast field of grass in neat rows - *wheat*, he was looking at a massive field of *wheat*, and Peter came up behind him and clapped him on the shoulder and they were grinning at each other, gaps in their smiles like they were five years old again. For all their tumultuous relationship with each other, JT and Peter intrinsically knew how to read the other. It was something they'd learned out of necessity, when talking wasn't an option and one wrong move meant both their deaths. It meant they didn't need to voice their elation and relief out loud in this moment.

They had lost something essential when Red Rock burned down and they were forced to leave the lakeside. Resources and materials they had been relying on for survival were stripped away with no warning, no time to prepare. Next time (and there would be a next time, JT knew), they had to be ready. Being ready meant having a stockpile, and there was really only one way to build a stockpile. And JT and Peter were pros at it.

The wheat field was massive. It reminded JT of his past life, of Iowa and mile-long stretches of corn, corn, corn. And it wasn't just wheat, either. There were other multi-acre patches of corn, barley, and beans on either side. JT's mouth watered at the thought of what it would look like when everything was ready to harvest.

The sounds that had led them to this discovery made themselves known again. JT tensed and clenched his fingers around his dagger. With a glance at Peter, he made his way forward deeper into the field.

Across from the woods they had come from was a run-down but functioning farm. The white house had seen better days, with the boarded up windows and shingles missing from the roof. Laundry hung out to dry on a clothesline, and the knees of all the pants were covered in patches. In a stark contrast, the silo that stood next to a barn was untarnished. Tractors and other farming machines were scattered across the large lawn in varying stages of disrepair. What JT had initially thought was a bear turned out to be the motor of a hover car, which had just pulled up next to the barn. The doors opened and four guards stepped out. Two took up positions outside of the barn while the others went towards the farmhouse.

After watching from amongst the corn for a near half an hour, the boys absconded back to the woodline where it would be safe to talk.

"We've got to play this safe," JT started, ignoring Peter's scoffed 'obviously.'

"I think we spend a week observing their schedules and route before even *thinking* of hitting it. They don't seem to be the most well-trained guards, from what we saw, and with luck there'll be some lapse in their patrol that we can take advantage of."

"If we plan it right, we should be able to get in and out without being seen. I know you keep saying we can't involve any of the others, but I really think Nat would be a big help with this--"

The growl that slipped from JT's throat was loud enough that they both froze and waited a good minute to make sure no one else had heard them.

"Nat already has her hands full with hunting. Everyone else has a role at the camp, and we can't take their time or risk them getting hurt. It's always been you and me, and it's gonna stay you and me. Got it?"

Peter stared JT down before finally sighing and throwing his head back. "You're lucky you're such a freak, JT, that we don't need anyone else. Fuckin psychopath."

An hour later and a kilometer away from the farm, they huddled around a small fire and sucked stringy meat off the bones of a tree rodent. When they set out from the camp, they'd planned to be gone for a while, scouting out a wide berth around where they'd decided to set up their base camp. No one would be missing them until six days from now.

Peter lay down on a pile of leaves and ragged sweaters while JT took first watch for the night.

It hadn't been what they'd been planning to do, when JT and Peter had set out. Tom told them to stick together and watch each others back, Nat made them promise to come back in one piece, Kevin had given them each one of his favorite rocks with a reminder that he would be wanting them back (the kid was smarter than most of the others gave him credit for, JT thought). So it hadn't exactly been the plan from square one, for them to split up on their second day. That was just the way the cards fell.

JT stayed by the farm. Every morning, after untying himself from the tree branch he'd strapped himself into to sleep, he would set up shop in the fields and watch the guards. All day, everyday, for almost a week. He took mental notes of when the shifts changed, where they stood, who had a weak bladder and took frequent bathroom breaks. He learned the names of the twelve guards who rotated duty watching the farm, learned their hobbies and addictions and what their families were like, the few that had them. He spent every minute he could spare calculating the room for error in their schedules and was finally able to pinpoint a consistent weak spot - as the star set and the second moon rose, when the afternoon shift left and the night shift was supposed to take up their positions, the first two on duty always dragged their feet and had to make an extra pot of coffee. It wasn't long at all, just fifteen minutes really, but it happened with enough regularity that JT knew he could make it work.

Peter crashed through the brush and into the small clearing JT was using for his nightly fire. After five and half days alone, covering probably miles of forest, he was looking worse for wear. His boots, already in poor condition when they'd set off, made a soft squelching noise every time he took a step. His hair was a wild mess that Sarah would probably want to shave back to his scalp when they got back to camp. Without saying a word, JT offered up the bowl of greens and roots that he'd been about to eat.

While Peter scarfed down the small meal, JT shared what he'd observed. "Three rotations, four guards each that take turns watching the barn in pairs. Jacobs and Rawley are the two on night shifts that like to spend a lot of time in the farm house when they're supposed to be on duty. Travers is a real hard ass, we do NOT want to try anything when he's on duty, he almost shot one of the farmhands when the guy came out of the fields. We've got one window, every other night..."

In turn, JT heard about what the woods around them had to offer. "Half a day north is an old ghost town, probably one of the first places emptied. Nothing much left there but rats. There's a deep river cutting east to west that could provide good fishing grounds. Saw a good few tree-grazer herds. Some spots of the fungus, but nothing to worry about yet. It seems like this part of the woods is less affected by it, for now. No other settlements."

Sated and content with his recount of the area, he settled down to rest. JT climbed up in his tree and took first watch.

"Holy shit, dude, yes!" Manic fire was crackling in JT's chest. His heart was pounding and adrenaline coursed through his veins. He couldn't hold it back any more, and let out a wild cry into the empty night air. Peter was running after him, arms equally full of fresh food. The

backpacks they were wearing were full of dried corn and barley. Chunks of potato were still stuck to their teeth where they'd bitten into the raw tubers and gorged themselves on the starch. JT didn't even care about the few potatoes and onions he was dropping as he ran through the woods, slowing to a jog and then a walk and finally, panting but still grinning, falling to his knees. Peter crashed down behind him a second later.

"We did it. They didn't even see us, JT, they don't even know we were there. We've got to do this again, dude."

The excitement made them both giddy. They couldn't be stopped; they were invincible.

"You know what, JT, why do they get to keep all this food locked up in this barn while people are starving? There's something seriously fucked up with this government."

"We've known this for months, Pete. What are you trying to say?"

"I think we ought to do something about it."

"I'm listening."

"Hey, JT, where were you last night? T'raya was asking for you."

"Shit, dude, sorry. I was with Peter."

"You two have been real buddy-buddy lately. What are you guys getting up to? We're still good on food from the last looting."

"It's nothing, Tommy. Just trying to bond with him, you know? Guy stuff."

"Is that why you both always come back smelling like smoke? 'Guy stuff'?"

"Dude, drop it."

"JT-"

"Seriously."

"Fuck - Pete, run, now-"

"Well, well, well, boys. What have we here?"

"Looks like some scrawny fugitives thought they could help themselves to our food."

"Tsk tsk, can't let them get away with that, can we now?"

“You pieces of shit took it too far this time. Got too big for your britches, ey? Thought you could make two trips in one night, steal double to grain. Really sticking it to the governor with that one, ain’t you?”

“What do you think we should do with em, Travers?”

They got sloppy. That’s really the only answer. They got lazy, didn’t stay on top of the schedule as well as they should have. It was JT’s fault. He should have noticed Rawley was on the afternoon duty. He should have seen the signals the guards traded when they changed shifts. He should have listened to the churning in his gut and the tingle of electricity making the hair on his arms stand up. He didn’t though, and now he and Peter were standing in front of four guardsmen, armed to the teeth and grinning ferally.

He was frozen. He couldn’t move. His eyes were fixed on the phasers in the guards hands. Even as Peter started backing away, dropping his bag and spilling precious grain on the floor, JT couldn’t move. He saw the phasers and he heard Will again, telling him to leave, to live. He tried, Will, he really tried, but it’d just been five months and now JT was going to be joining his cousin.

Maybe he could distract them while Peter ran? At least then he’d be doing something meaning full, and Pete wouldn’t tell the whole group that JT had been too scared to do anything but die. Time was moving slow but too-fast and he couldn’t think, what use were all his smarts if he couldn’t think?

Through the thick air, he heard one of the guards start talking again.

“It seems we’ve got a runner, boys! You keep an eye on blondie, Grey and I’ll take care of this one.”

Two bodies moved past him. One shoulder-checked him, knocking him to the ground and scattering the corn cobs he’d be holding close to his chest. He could hear them as they moved away from the barn, running after Peter, hooting and hollering. Phaser fire started up. JT flinched. Someone screamed. Their voice cracked, and they fell silent. Laughter. Another shot was fired and the screaming started again.

It didn’t stop.

JT finally looked up at the two guards that had been left in the barn with him, the debilitating fear transforming into something that made his hands shake and his eyes tear up.

It was Rawley and Jacobs. They didn’t look as dumb and lazy up close.

“Pick up the corn you dropped, boy,” one of them ordered. JT rushed to obey, crawling on his hands and knees to gather up the corn cobs. As he reached for one, a boot lashed out and kicked it away. JT scrambled after it, trying not to listen to their laughter. Peter was still screaming outside.

“Your friend made a real mess of that grain. Pick that up, too.” Thousands of pieces of barley were scattered on the dirt floor on the barn a few yards away. He made to get up and walk over, but one of the men kicked the back of his knee and put him back on the ground.

“Crawl.”

Shame licked up JT’s spine as he obeyed. God, why couldn’t he stand up for himself and *do something* like Peter had? Was it worse to be tortured in a corn field by two sadists (they were still laughing out there, like his friend’s life was a game), or treated like a dog? JT didn’t know, but at least Peter would maintain his dignity when he died. He couldn’t say the same for himself.

“What’s wrong, boy? Worried about your friend out there?” A foot planted on his lower back and JT was forced flat on the floor, barely able to turn his head in time to avoid face planting in the dirt. “Don’t worry, you’ll be joining him soon enough. We just thought he’d have a little bit of fun, first.”

He was kicked over onto his back, blinking dust out of his eyes and staring, brain still stuttering, up at the two men towering over him.

He got no warning for the boot that was driven into the side of his rib cage, just the shock of debilitating pain that followed. A shout slipped through his lips, followed by a grunt as he tried to protect his now bruised ribs. Another kick caught his chin and snapped his head back, teeth clacking together with enough force the roots ached and he tasted blood. Steel-toed boots dug into his groin and he felt it in his throat, stomach acid fighting to get out. Another strike rained down on his torso, and another, and another, and all JT could do was curl up in a ball and try to ride out the pain. Tears trickled down, over the bridge of his nose and into the dust and dirt underneath him.

The abuse didn’t seem to stop for an eternity. Sharp bolts ran up his spine as a toe dug into his kidney, pulling a long, drawn out whine from his throat. Someone stepped on his ankle, and though the bones didn’t crack under the pressure they did groan along with him. A lucky kick drove up between his legs and JT saw stars, gasping for a breath he couldn’t pull in as white-hot pain washed over him for a solid ten seconds.

*

When his vision cleared, he recognized Rawley staring down at him with an unrecognizable look on his face. JT stared back. Rawley cocked his head and let his gaze roam down JT’s body and back up. Sickening comprehension of what the man’s leer meant bloomed in his stomach and he drew his thighs together.

Rawley started off talking slowly, purposefully.

“You know, Travers has his wife to go home to. The rest of us ain’t got nothing, and the boss has us working around the clock. Can’t even go visit the whores in the city anymore, since grain started going missing from this place. It’s all this fucker’s fault and I think he ought to be taught a lesson.”

Jacobs came over and stood over JT as well, eyes lingering on his face before traveling down to his groin.

Outside, the night finally fell quiet, and JT didn't know if he mourned the death of his friend, or if he wished he could have joined him.

"No no no no..." Unfiltered terror finally broke JT out of the shocked daze he'd fallen into, and he found the energy to scramble away from the two men and towards the wall of the barn. His ribs burned and his ankle didn't work quite right and his breaths started coming quicker and shorter. Revulsion at the mere suggestion made his stomach turn and threaten to empty itself. No, they couldn't, this world was horrible and rotten but there were some things you just didn't do, this wasn't happening to him, God, *please*-

"Ain't no God here to help you now, boy," Jacobs drawled. The man stalked forward and JT had backed himself against a wall, arms wrapped around his knees and a litany of 'no, please, stop' fell from his lips unanswered.

Jacobs was right. There was no God on Tarsus, not anymore.

JT's screams picked up where Peter's left off, and didn't stop for hours.

JT may have limped out of that barn, exhausted and in pain yet alive, but a part of him - the part that still had hope and held out trust in the goodness of man, maybe - was left, balled up and bruised, on that haunted farm.

He promised himself he'd never go back there. He'd never have to relive the horrors, the trauma he'd just gone through. His kids wouldn't fault him for that.

Three weeks later, Elina starts to run a fever. She catches a cough that won't go away, shakes hard enough that she can't get any sleep. Nothing they do, none of the herbs they know, can help her. JT leaves for the night, returns with a bottle of expired medicine that at least lowers her temperature and missing another small part of himself.

Chapter End Notes

* At the end of the chapter, after JT and Peter are caught by the guards, JT is beat up. One of the guards begins making comments implying sexual urges. The scene ends with JT screaming before jumping into the future, where he feels like he must return to the farm because one of the kids falls ill.

The events described here are marked by an asterisk in the story, so you can stop (hopefully) before reading anything triggering or upsetting!

Refrain

Chapter Summary

It is inevitable, really. If anything, JT is surprised it took this long for his luck to run out. But it has, and now he's locked up in a dungeon of all things. The only blessing is knowing that somewhere out there, his kids are alive and safe still. He'll give up his life ten-fold, if it means Kodos can't get his hands on them.

Chapter Notes

This one is... rough. There is a general recap of the events of this chapter in the end notes if you aren't comfortable reading about torture and attempted execution. It isn't super explicit, but look out for yourself!

I'm fairly proud of this chapter, so I really hope you all like it. Enjoy!

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

There's a pipe dripping somewhere down the hall. Every two-and-forty-two-hundredths seconds, a bead of water falls into the bucket underneath it, splashing in the water collected there. It's how JT keeps track of the hours that pass by when he's bored and alone in his cell. Anytime he's in his cell he's bored and alone, not to mention cold, hungry, exhausted, and a million other words for miserable, but it's all still better than when he's out of his cell. *Drip, Drip, drip*. He wonders what that water tastes like. It's probably lukewarm and flavored by the rusty pipes it runs through, but what he wouldn't give to feel it dripping onto his tongue. When was the last time he was deemed worthy of a sip of water? It had to have been more than two days ago. 71,404 drips ago. 71,405. 71,406.

His luck had run up three weeks ago, out on what was supposed to be a routine day out with Nat (and by a day out, he meant they'd located a guard's armory and were going to steal as many phasers as they could carry in their four hands). It wasn't their first rodeo. JT never let his confidence leech his concentration, he'd sat watching the concrete building for twelve hours straight before considering it safe and empty enough for him and Nat to approach. They even knew where all the cameras and motion sensors were. They'd been *smart* about it, maybe even smarter than they'd been about the previous few locations they'd visited, but still they were punished. Apparently, he hadn't accounted for the government's increased attention on them. They were in and out in under five minutes, but the hover cars and trucks full of armored guards were there in four and a half.

He and Nat gave as good as they got. They exchanged fire with the men for a solid fifteen minutes, and a good number of them were sprawled out, bodies cooling, by the time the two

kids had to retreat and make a break for it. Wait, no, that's not quite how it ended up going down, was it?

She'd already emptied the battery of one phaser. Three more, full of charge, sat at her feet, and four at his. They were crouched behind a concrete half wall, trying to catch their breaths and find a way to make it out of this alive. They'd talked about it before, what they'd do if they were pinned down on one of their outings, but neither really believed it would happen. Not some sense of immortality and infallibility, not really, but they figured one of the guards shots would strike true long before they had an opportunity to make a break for it. Still, they'd made the plan. All they had to do was stick to it.

JT pulled in a deep breath. There wasn't time to freeze up and think too slow-fast. He hadn't done that in months. He'd learned to tamp down that instinctual reaction, after - well. He didn't freeze anymore. He made eye contact with Nat, trying to block out the phaser fire that struck the wall they were taking shelter behind and that made dust rain down on them. She met his eyes in return. They both knew the plan. She reached out and ran her fingertips down his cheek, etching his features into her memory. They both leaned forward and met each other in a brief kiss that made his lips ache with the pressure and desperation of it. She nodded and picked up her phasers.

This would be the last time they saw each other, if everything went to plan.

JT leaned out around the side of the wall, firing off short bursts that forced the guards to seek shelter and halt their own volley for a few precious seconds. In the next second Nat fled the opposite direction, hunched over almost in half and not once looking back. JT didn't let his eyes follow her, either, not even when she reached the treeline and faltered. The guards began firing back at him, and he barely managed to duck back behind the wall before a blast of energy occupied the space his head had a moment ago.

It went on like that for a few more minutes, JT doing his best to hold his ground and kill as many as he could in the time he had left. The power bank bar of his phaser flashed red and he threw it aside with a growl. One left. He had to make it count.

The guards started pushing forward. They finally picked up on the singular source of fire and took advantage of it. They also noticed when he started having to conserve his energy. A bolt of bright, burning pain lanced up JT's arm and he shouted, throwing himself back and behind the shelter of his wall as he clutched his forearm. Blood immediately began welling up in a large, irregular circle branded on his right arm that had vaporized the first few layers of skin. Fuck, whoever designed phasers deserved to burn in the tenth ring of hell. JT blinked tears of pain out of the corners of his eyes and reached for his phaser. His hand met bare dirt. There, a few feet away and fully out of cover, his last phaser saw on the ground. He heard a chorus of voices begin approaching when they were no longer met with enemy fire.

JT's lip twitched up. They ought not expect him to be harmless, not until he was cold and dead and buried under six feet of cement. From two leather sheaths strapped to his thighs he drew twin blades, each a foot long and just sharpened that morning. Ignoring the tremor in his right hand, he crouched and waited for the first guard to turn the corner.

His nightmares often featured the sound of flesh being rended, along with a cacophony of screams and sobbing. That day provided enough material for a hundred nights.

He expected to be killed then and there. His blades had been wrenched from his hands, fingers broken for good measure. Burns littered his skin from glancing shots that had slowed him down enough to be disarmed. The bodies of six guards were spread in a ring around him, his blood mixed with their dripping down his forehead and into his eye. He expected them to force him to his knees and put the red-hot end of a phaser to his forehead and pull the trigger. He didn't expect them to bind his hands and feet, gag and blindfold him, throw him in the back of a truck with a few of the more sadistic guards. After that, he didn't expect to make it back to the compound they were taking him to.

He sure as hell didn't expect to see the antagonist featured in his nightmares when he woke up in a damp prison cell.

Three weeks ago, JT had seen Kodos again. The man had been some strange mix of ecstatic and enraged to see him. He'd punched him hard enough, and enough times, to fracture his cheekbone and knock out his loose molar. He hadn't been very entertained when JT spit the tooth at him. JT thought it was *hilarious*.

The governor probably expected he'd lose his fire at some point during his stay there. To be honest, JT half expected it too. But nothing the guards and the torturers and the sadists dressed in lab coats did could compare to what four grain guards had done eight months ago. JT laughed in their faces every chance he got after they were done with him, if he managed to hold onto his consciousness. As the weeks dragged on, that happened less and less.

Heeled footsteps echoed down the hallway, breaking JT out of his reminiscing. He cracked open dry and swollen eyelids and forced a grin onto his face when he saw who was approaching. The split in his lip, courtesy of the meathead who was forced to bring JT his meals and who didn't appreciate being called dollface, ripped open a hair more and blood began to bead up on his skin.

Kodos stopped in front of his cell door. He was dressed immaculately, as always, crisp white shirt and grey slacks with an ironing crease down the front. Leather gloves had become a staple since the time he split his knuckles open raining blows on JT's face. His loafers had a one inch heel. They looked like the type of shoes his grandma would wear, if she was still alive. Kodos' face scrunched up in righteous anger. Whoops, looked like he'd said that out loud.

"You look like shit, James." The same thing he always said when he came to visit.

JT couldn't care less what the bastard thought. "You like today's look? Give your compliments to Dr. Fisher, he wanted to know what the insides of my eye sockets looked like. He probably has pictures, if you want to ask."

It had hurt worse than a lot of the things they put him through. Cold metal instruments had wrapped around his eyeball and pulled and he'd screamed and twitched and thrown up on himself, strapped down to an exam table. JT didn't even twitch as the memory washed over him, just relished in the feeling of finally being able to blink again.

“This could be over, you know.” The man always managed to look so sympathetic, every time he came down here to do his little spiel. That might have been what JT hated most about their back-and-forth.

“What, and deny them their fun? I would never-”

“Just tell us where your band of fugitives is, and you don’t have to suffer anymore.”

They did this *every time*. Kodos wasn’t even original, maybe that was the worst part of this.

“What, so you’ll go out there all kill them all, then come back and finish the job you started with me? Even if I did know where they are, which I DON’T, what the hell did I even do to make you believe I’d turn them in? Really, Adrian, I thought we knew each other better than that.”

Kodos motioned for the guard beside him, whom JT had dubbed Babydoll, to open the cell door. JT let himself have a moment of weakness, closing his eyes and letting out a deep sigh, beginning his sequence of mental exercises he always did when being ‘encouraged’ to betray his kids.

Two and two is four. Four and four is eight. The first blow struck his cheek bone, still fractured and swollen from their first session and a popular place for him to start. *Eight and eight is sixteen.* Blood and spit flew from his lips as his head was jerked to the side, jaw smarting. *Sixteen and sixteen is thirty-two.* A fist buried into his stomach. *Good thing I haven’t eaten this week.* *Thirty-two and thirty-two is sixty-four.* Another strike to his temple. *Sixty-four and sixty-four is one hundred-twenty-eight.* A hand gripped his hair and held his head in place and a quick succession of blows met his face. Blood dribbled down his face and the back of his throat. *One-twenty-eight and one-twenty-eight is two-fifty-six.* Two hands wrapped around his neck and squeezed. He tried to gulp down and breathe and found nothing. *Two-fifty-six and two-fifty-six is - is - fuck-*

Five-twelve. JT opened his eyes slowly, ignoring the way his vision swam and warm blood stung. His lungs were burning. His face was probably starting to tinge blue. He made eye contact with Kodos, relishing in the crazed rage he saw there. He forced his lips into a smirk.

Kodos swore and let him go, backing up a few feet to avoid the spray of blood as JT hacked and coughed and sucked in precious air. When he finally caught his breath (it took way too long, his body was getting so weak, any day now...) and looked back up at the governor, the smirk was firmly back in place. It widened when he saw the man pulling off his gloves.

“What, are we done so soon? I thought we were just getting started. Man, you got me all excited for nothing.”

Kodos ignored him, turning and calling out for Babydoll to open the gate again. He said something to the man as he stepped out, something JT didn’t manage to pick up, his ears still ringing from his temporary deprivation of oxygen. The guard entered the cell and grabbed JT by his upper arm and yanked him up from the chair he’d been sitting in.

“Ooh, are we going on a field trip? Is it the zoo? Please let it be the zoo,” he babbled as he was dragged down the hall, stumbling and letting Babydoll do most of the work moving his body. Kodos walked in front of them.

They went further than JT was used to. Usually when he was taken out of his cell to be tortured, they only went around the corner, *maybe* to the cell block adjacent to his own if they were doing something special. Never up the stairs Kodos always came down. Sharp tingles of anxiety, like a mouthful of pins, flared up in his gut. He pushed it down.

Kodos stopped before a heavy wooden door. JT took the moment to look around, blinking thick eyelids as he took in the room they were in.

It was nice. Nicer than anything he'd seen in the past year and change. The floors were scuffed but freshly cleaned. JT felt a bit bad about the trail of blood he must be leaving in his wake. There wasn't much furniture in the room, just a few arm chairs and side tables. One of the chairs was obviously more comfortable than the others, overstuffed and bearing creases of frequent use. There was a bottle of some kind of liquor sitting out on a little side table, and a few glass tumblers. It must be a welcoming room, JT realized, where Kodos entertained his guests.

“How come I've never been in your sitting room, Adrian? You know, you catch more flies with honey-” He was yanked along, sentence cut off as Babydoll dragged him out the door that had been opened when he was distracted. The sunlight outside burned his eyes and JT screwed them shut, wincing and ducking his head for a split second before forcing himself to straighten up and walk with confidence. His eyes were taking their sweet time adjusting to the change in lighting, but his ears worked fine enough. He heard the rumble of a not-too-distant crowd. Babydoll dragged him up a short set of stairs and onto a flat platform. The sound of the crowd got louder and louder, then fell into an unnatural hush.

It took a long moment before JT could open his eyes and not be blinded by stabbing pain and bright white light. When he finally did, a stone dropped in his stomach. He was standing on a wooden stage, looking out at a massive crowd of people. There must have been a thousand there, maybe more. It was almost exclusively young adults, majority male and human. They all wore drab clothes that hung off their frames and belts bearing extra notches. Their faces were gaunt and hollow. They stared up at JT without emotion.

In the back of the crowd, he thought he saw a flicker of short black hair and a short, tanned girl. When he squinted he saw only weak twenty-something year olds. JT shook off Babydoll's loosening grip on his arm and turned to Kodos.

The man beside him couldn't be identified as governor Kodos. He couldn't be identified as anyone, on account of the black mask he wore to cover his face, all but the haunting blue eyes watching him with glee. An executioner's hood. He had walked, docile, to his own execution. A familiar manic fire was in the man's eyes for the split second JT stared him down. Then Kodos turned to address their audience.

“People of Tarsus IV, you have been gathered here to witness another execution of a fugitive, who has been stealing from the grain storages that feed you, who has destroyed resources needed to protect you and killed the brave men who swore to keep you safe. For these crimes,

and the crime of sheltering other fugitives who he refuses to turn in, he is to be executed publicly. Rest assured, the others will be found in time and brought here to face justice. After all: when one breaks the rules, one is punished.”

“Kind of leaving out an important part of your slogan, aren’t you?” JT’s voice was hoarse and cracked from puberty and strangulation, but stronger than he expected it to be. All eyes shot to him, the audience shocked that he had the balls to speak at all. Kodos ground his teeth together, glaring at JT from under his hood. “How are you planning to punish the all, governor? Because two broke the rules this time. Actually, more like nine, if we’re counting here.” A murmur broke out in the crowd, quickly falling to silence when Kodos’s hand lashed out and slapped JT’s cheek. The crack echoed off the buildings around them, and JT dabbed at the blood flowing faster from his lip with his tongue.

“You use your witty retorts to delay the inevitable, James.” (“You think I’m witty? Aww.”)
“You will die today, there is no way to escape your fate.”

“I’d hope not. Wouldn’t want to be oh-for-two, would we?” He couldn’t help but smirk when Kodos let out an audible growl. His smirk grew more forced when a familiar black pistol was drawn.

“Yes, you remember this weapon, don’t you? It failed to do its job before, but rest assured, it will not miss this time.”

Kodos raised the gun in the air, aimed at JT’s forehead. JT stepped forward to meet the barrel and leaned into the cold metal.

“You can kill me, Adrian. You can kill my cousin, you can kill my kids. You can kill thirty thousand colonists. But you’ll answer for your crimes, and when you die and go straight to Hell, I’ll be fucking waiting.”

The man adjusted his grip on his gun, fingers twitching, the bottom edge of his hood folding and creasing as he smiled beneath it. “See you in a few years, then, James.”

A single shot rang out. As far as comparison to last time, JT thought he’d handled this execution a lot better. Maybe his ‘fearlessness in the face of death’ would get him something in hell. Probably not.

Was it supposed to take this long to lose consciousness and die?

JT blinked and took in the bright sunlight hitting him in the face. He was still alive. Interesting. He’d heard the crack of an archaic gunshot, though, hadn’t he?

The crowd he stood before was loud, raging and screaming and beginning to jostle the platform he stood on. Kodos was no longer in front of him, and instead lay sprawled on the stage, two hands clasping his abdomen. Blood seeped out from between his fingers. The man

looked up and met JT's eyes, something parallel to fear in there. JT crouched and picked up the pistol that had been dropped at his feet, checked to make sure the chamber was full.

"Same time next week?" He smirked and turned to leave, hoping to blend into the crowd during the pandemonium. Instead, he found himself face to face with Babydoll and another guard. JT ducked under the hands that reached to grab him, dancing away a few feet and raising his newly claimed gun. He fired twice. Two bodies hit the floor. More of the civilians were watching him now, faces guarded and fists clenched. A ripple moved through the crowd, starting near the rear, as if someone was pushing their way through towards the front.

"I don't want any problems with the lot of you," JT started, lowering the weapon and addressing the crowd at large.

"You're a criminal! You should be tried and punished accordingly!" someone shouted from the middle of the group of people.

JT winced, brows furrowing. "You'd trust the word of that mad man? I'm fourteen. He tried to execute me a year ago for sneaking out of school. What sort of criminal justice system utilizes draconian law in this day and age? And on children! I was a *child*, still am one, and any laws I break, I break for the sole purpose of keeping other children he would have otherwise killed, alive.

"Governor Kodos does not have your best interest in heart. He never did. He only wants power, and will do just about anything to get it. He shot up a school, starved those he deemed 'undesired,' and murdered hundreds of 'threats to society' - innocent, hungry people - in a single day. He was on the wrong side, and the history books will remember that. Do you want to be remembered the same way, as supporting a genocidal maniac? Do you want my blood, and the blood of my children, on your hands?"

At some point, the city square had gone silent. He could only hear his own voice filling the space, and the not-too-distant sound of boots marching towards them. Then the murmuring started up again. A set of hands reached out and grabbed a hold of his arms, pulled him to the edge of the platform and down onto the cobblestone street. JT raised his eyes and met the gaze of an older man. Thick ropes of scar tissue covered his arms. He wore thin and stained clothes, just like the rest of them. So this was Kodos' selection of the 'worthy,' still suffering and slowly dying.

"My niece was at the boarding school. I... She didn't make it out. But some of you kids did?"

JT nodded. It took a second to find his voice. "I tried to save as many as I could. It wasn't enough, but. I got some out, and I've just been trying to keep them alive since."

He had tried to avoid thinking about his kids for the past three weeks. Where they were now, how they were managing with his absence, if they were still alive at all. A sharp dagger of fear was thrust into his gut when he realized he might not be able to find them again. The wilderness was vast, and those kids knew it front to back, blindfolded. They could very well be a hundred miles away by then. He might never see his kids again.

A hand grabbed his elbow suddenly. JT jerked, swinging out to strike his attacker with a closed fist that was ducked. A head of short black hair bobbed back into view, along with a half-empty smile. The breath left his lungs in a short burst and his vision narrowed in on the tanned face in front of him.

Nat was standing in front of him.

Words escaped him.

Then she was punching him, hard, in the shoulder, and he almost crumpled to the ground when she struck the swollen, recently-dislocated and relocated joint. Her eyes widened and she reached out, stabilizing him, wrapping an arm around his ribcage and forcing her way into one of his armpits.

“Jay-motherfucking-T, don’t you EVER pull this shit again. Do you know how terrifying it was, watching you up there antagonizing your would-be murderer? God, you are the dumbest boy I have ever met.”

He couldn’t do anything but gape, sucking in short and shallow breaths as he tried to comprehend what was happening.

“I- Nat, what the hell- why are you- *how*- ”

“Not the issue at hand here, Jay. We’ve got to get the hell out of dodge before those guards show up and finish what I started.”

Wait, what? “ *You* shot Kodos?!”

“Gotta say, a gun works a lot better than a rock.”

“Hold on-”

But Nat was already beginning to drag him away, doing her best to skirt around the edge of the group of people. While he’d been stuck in his bubble up against the stage, the rest of the crowd had been getting more and more disorderly. The marching of boots almost upon them. If they wanted a chance at survival, after everything Nat had done, they had to leave now.

And so they did, slipped out through an alley cluttered and crowded with bags of garbage and puddles of excrement and who-knows-what. They made it three blocks away before the phaser fire started up. Four more before the city fell silent.

They passed by the last street full of houses as the star was setting. Nat pulled him into a small grove of trees, the branches thick enough that they couldn’t be seen through them. As soon as they slowed to a stop, the first time they’d stopped moving since the shooting started, she pulled him into a tight hug.

His bruised torso ached something brutal, and he could have sworn something shifted where it wasn’t supposed to. That didn’t matter. He wrapped his arms around her and squeezed back.

“I wasn’t sure I was going to make it in time.” Her words were muffled against his chest, but when he tried to pull back to hear her clearly she burrowed in deeper. He settled on running one hand up and down the back of her head.

“You did though. You saved my life, I guess.”

“Just returning the favor.” They both chuckled, and neither commented that it was more watery than usual.

At last she pulled back and held him at an arm's length, trying to take in his state of being in the dim light of one moon.

“God, JT, what did they do to you?” One hand reached up to caress his cheek. Her fingertips got too close to his eye socket and he flinched, hard, jerking his face away and almost tripping over his own feet. She dropped her hands back to her sides.

“It was fucking hell, but nothing I couldn’t handle. I’ll be fine.”

He didn’t like the pity in her eyes. The way she articulated her every move, hesitated before touching him. He understood it. He knew he was frail, that even though he’d made it out of that cell he wasn’t in the clear yet. Didn’t mean he had to like it.

He cleared his throat, then winced at how far the sound seemed to carry in the night. “How are the rest? Is everyone okay? I know you guys moved after I was caught, did you manage to find some place decent? How’s Tom handling everything? Is-”

“Woah, woah, slow down. Everyone’s alright, though spirits haven’t been the best since you got snatched. We managed to relocate to a little cave to the north east, I don’t know if you remember but we crashed there for a bit a few months ago. Leadership of the group fell on T’lak, and she’s been doing her best but we were really hurting without you. Everyone’ll be glad to have you back.”

JT let out a sigh he hadn’t realized he’d been holding and slumped forward. His kids were okay. He was going to see them again. It was going to be okay.

They didn’t spend the night in that small cluster of trees, only rested there long enough for him to catch his breath, and for her to convince him to swallow a few gulps of water and a handful of foraged nuts. Then they were off again, Nat leading the way and JT trying his best not to slow her down. She set a punishing pace, and JT didn’t complain once. It would be a four days journey, and he didn’t want anything to delay him from seeing Kevin and T’raya and everyone again.

Chapter End Notes

General recap: JT was caught by Kodos and his guards and has been held captive, alone, for three weeks. Over the three weeks, he has been subjected to a number of different

torture methods trying to get him to tell them the whereabouts of the rest of his kids, along with just wanting to cause him pain and in the name of "research." Eventually, Kodos gets sick of trying to get information from JT and brings him out to the town square, planning to execute him. Nat somehow found her way into the city, however, and thwarts this second execution attempt. JT and Nat are able to get away from town, but aren't in the clear yet, as they still have to get back to the kids - wherever they might be, at this point.

I hope you all enjoyed reading this one! I think I had a bit TOO much fun writing this part of the story, but what's done is done! If you liked this chapter and are enjoying this fic, feel free to drop a comment! You can also contact me on tumblr at megmachine, I'd love to hear from y'all. Much love! <3

Deliverance

Chapter Summary

Set immediately after Punishment (Take 2), JT and Nat try to find their way back to camp. Unfortunately, it seems they have picked up some unwanted guests.

Chapter Notes

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

They are exhausted. They are slowly dying, him more than her, but they are both flagging. He tells her to leave him behind, on numerous occasions, until she begins to ignore him all together as they drag each other through the dying woods of Tarsus IV. They hope, feverishly, that the blood left on the dirt behind them isn't a trail.

It starts with the snap of a tree branch behind them. They're dragging themselves through the woods - more like Nat is dragging him, head on a swivel, eyes manic and a knife clenched in her free hand - and they don't have the time nor the energy to make sure they aren't leaving a trail at the moment. Time is of the essence, and they'd waste too much trying to cover their tracks. JT just wants to see his kids again, god, it feels like it's been years. At times his vision blurs, and ringing starts up in his ears, and he can't put one foot in front of the other. It's at those times that Nat usually pauses, forces JT to scarf down some water and scraps of food from her bag.

This time he stumbles, and she just drags him back up. He thinks he's just imagining it, or maybe she's just paranoid, but no. It happens again, and it's louder this time. Nat's breath catches in her throat.

JT is too thoroughly beat up to do anything but hold her back. Both eyelids are still swollen and obstruct his vision, his shoulder throbs every time he tries to use his arm, every muscle screams in protest with the slightest movement. His abdomen hurt something awful and, the few times he'd glanced under the raggedy shirt he was wearing, there were deep purple - almost black - bruises covering the scarred skin. He didn't voice his concerns to Nat, both of them already too stressed, but he wondered how much internal bleeding he could take before losing consciousness. Before passing the point of no return. Maybe, if he was lucky, he'd be able to see his kids one last time. That was all he wanted, really.

He must have spaced out, lost in his head trying to block out the pain as he was wont to do, because the next thing he knows Nat is trying to make him move faster and tugs on his arm and his vision goes white-hot. He thinks he shouts, but he isn't conscious enough for a few seconds to be sure.

“Fuck,” she whispered. As his thoughts cleared, he contemplated what their options were. He couldn’t run, couldn’t shake off whatever their tail was. Nat would be able to lose them, if she was alone, but he only held her back. They both knew they’d deal with this threat together, however it went. Could they turn and face the conflict? Truly, the question was if Nat could turn and face them, as he was barely strong enough to put one foot in front of the other. Even if she could get rid of their follower, what were the odds they were alone?

There was a rock formation on their right. Maybe they could duck behind that, try to get the drop on their stalker? Obviously Nat had weapons on her person, maybe even a phaser or two if they were lucky. Could he wield a knife? Could he handle the recoil of a firearm? Would he be a sitting duck?

Nat had a similar idea to his, apparently, as she pushed him behind a larger outcropping of rock. Another crumple of dead leaves under heavy feet, following their tracks. Getting closer.

“What do you got?” JT whispered. Nat swung her bag down from her shoulder, pulling it open and drawing out a knife as long as her forearm.

She paused and looked back up to him. “There’s at least two of them.” Another pause, as they listened to the slowly approaching footfalls. “You need to get back to the family. They need you there, JT, way more than they need anyone else. You know where the cave is, right?”

“I’m not leaving you to face two men alone, Nat.”

“God dammit JT, what the fuck are you going to do? Bleed on them? I can hold my own! You can barely walk!”

He clenched his fists, ignoring how pain radiated from the clearly broken bones. “Exactly. I’m not gonna make it back there without you. You just found me, and you’re already trying to get rid of me?”

Nat pressed her lips together for a moment before letting out a puff of air. Without words, she riffled through her bag again, drawing out an old, beat up phaser. The battery pack, when she turned it on, flashed red.

She handed it to him.

“It’s only got four, maybe five shots left in it. Just watch my back, okay? Let me handle them.”

He nodded.

They shuffled a few feet back, trying to get around the boulder and put more space between themselves and where the bastards following them would come through. JT felt his heart, weak as it was, pounding against his ribcage. Nat adjusted her grip on her knife. The footsteps came closer.

Then they were rounding the corner, and Nat was striking like a viper.

The first one didn't stand a chance. He was just turning to face them, his own blade held loose by his side, when Nat drove hers into his neck. Bloodshot eyes widened comically and blood sprayed down her front as she pulled back, teeth bared. He crumpled to the ground. The forest felt like it froze for a second as everything drew quiet, the calm before all hell broke loose.

Phaser fire sounded up on the other side of the rock and Nat flinched, drawing away from the edge and pressing her back against the stone. Loud, angry voices shouted - far more than just two of them. JT pressed his eyes closed and considered, briefly, praying.

Nat slapped him across the face and he opened his eyes again.

"Are you going to help me not die, or what?"

He blinked, then nodded. The phaser stopped shaking in his grip.

So what if he never got a break? So what if the universe kept throwing tragedy after tragedy at him? His life was a fucking joke, but he wasn't going to let Nat deal with it all on her own. He could aim a gun and shoot, even with a broken body.

They took the time to listen, to try and map out where all the threats were on the other side of their rock barricade. Two standing farther off in the woods, yelling and making a racket, likely trying to cover up the sound of their buddies creeping closer to their hideaway. One approached from the left, where his dead friend still lay, blood pooling. Another one or two were trying to go the long way around, trying to catch them off guard.

Nat went for the two sneaky bastards. JT inched his way towards the one on his lonesome, finger hovering over the trigger. The plan was to strike as close to the same time as possible, to hopefully distract the gunners who had stayed back. JT held his breath and counted to three.

It hurt like hell. His muscles screamed in protest at the sudden movement as he swung around the corner, phaser rising and leveling inches from a stranger's face. In his peripheral vision he could see a knife coming towards his abdomen. The man's face was slick and shiny with sweat, dark brown hair damp and matted against his forehead. His teeth were yellow, almost brown, scattered haphazardly behind chapped lips. Eyes went wide in surprise, then narrowed.

JT couldn't afford to give him time to react. His index finger twitched.

Sweat-slicked skin burned away, turned dark red then black and crumpling away into dust. The body fell to the ground to rest next to his friend.

Behind him, he heard Nat struggling with her own combatants. Suppressing the urge to turn around and help her, JT instead crouched and tried to catch a glimpse of the 2 people keeping their distance. He laid eyes on one man, then had to jerk back and behind the cover of stone as a beam of energy created a crater just a foot above his head.

"You good?" Nat panted in his ear. There was blood smeared across her chin and neck, and a few more spots of angry red, turning purple, seemed to litter her arms and face.

"Are you?"

She waved him off without an answer. "How are the snipers looking?"

JT explained the situation to her, their missing shooter, much to her annoyance.

"We can try waiting it out here, but sun's gonna go down soon. Maybe pushing forward as quietly as we can is the move?"

She nodded in agreement, face set. A quick glance over the bodies around them came up with a meager ration of dried jerky and hardtack, which they split half of between themselves and stored the rest in their pockets, as well as a few dull knives that were stuffed into her knapsack.

After waiting another few minutes, both straining to hear any sign of movement in the woods around them, they began creeping up the hillside and continuing their path back to the camp. Both took their time navigating around the patches of dried leaves and scattered debris that would broadcast their location to anyone listening. For the time being, JT was able to stuff the majority of his aches behind a mental barricade, but the further they moved away from the scene of the fight, tense and on edge, the more his weakness seemed to seep into his every muscle fiber.

They kept going long past sundown. Relying on the eerie glow of the double moons, they barely stopped but to regard their surroundings until the second one's red face sat high above their heads, well past midnight. Didn't stop until JT fell, tripped over a tree root he hadn't noticed, and his arms were too heavy to push him back to his feet. Nat had sighed, but rested her hand on his shoulder to stop him as he struggled, fruitlessly, to force himself back upright.

"We have to take a break sometime, and at least here there's a good view of our surroundings."

JT couldn't find it in himself to argue with her anymore. Just stopped trying to get up, laid back on the leaves and twigs that stabbed into his back and tried to relax. After a few seconds, Nat stripped her outer layer off and draped it over his abdomen.

She sat beside him, and started carding her fingers through his hair. In the distance, a night bird called out, and its mate responded.

"No one tried to stop me from coming out to find you," she started when the rasp of his breath finally started sounding quiet enough. "I think they were all getting sick of me, to be honest. I can't blame them. I was a fucking mess, the whole month. Tom isn't faring much better, but at least he doesn't have anger issues. No, he was able to at least survive without you there, I was barely able to function for the first few days. And don't get me started on Kevin and T'raya, god. I don't know if I've ever heard a Vulcan cry as much as that girl has. Honestly, JT, we've been falling apart without you. We need you to come back home."

It was quiet again, for a few minutes at least.

“I’m not gonna be home for long, I don’t think. I’m bleeding out,” he finally said. Her fingers froze against his scalp. “I don’t know if it’ll stop by itself, or if this is it for me, but I think it’s my liver. Kodos and his minions really enjoyed hitting me there.”

Another night bird call, this time with no response. “If I’m gonna go out in the next few days, I just want to see my kids again. I want to die near them, far away from Kodos and guards and all the adults who ever let me down.

“Thank you, Nat. Thank you for giving me at least this.”

One of them, he wasn’t sure which, sniffled. Her fingers went back to stroking his greasy locks, crusted with blood and dirt.

At some point after that, he fell asleep, her thigh a comforting pressure against his shoulder.

When he woke up the following morning, his arm was cold and she was gone.

He didn’t get to wake up gradually, the way he did when he was locked up in Kodos’ jail cell. There, it was like his brain went online in phases, one sense after the other. Maybe it was because he was never woken up by a child screaming, maybe it was because his body was so battered and broken it didn’t work quite right anymore, but the process always took a few minutes. This morning, it was all with one jolt - touch, sight, hearing, all at once.

And it was to the sound of Nat shouting.

As his eyes shot open, he saw her. A few yards away from him, facing into the woods the way they had come. She was on her feet, but seemed unbalanced. She yelled again, and he was able to process what she was saying.

“JT, get your ass up and run!”

He could barely push himself into an upright position, head throbbing from dehydration and probably a severe concussion. His stomach hurt, his arms hurt, everything hurt and Nat was yelling at him again to leave and his brain wasn’t moving fast enough to understand what was happening.

Something moved in the woods beyond Nat. Two somethings. They moved closer, until they were close enough that JT was finally able to understand what was happening.

They should have known better to rest when they could’ve been being tailed.

“Fuck,” he breathed out.

Something struck the ground near him, and the smell of smoke reached his nostrils.

“Fuck!”

Nat's hands were empty, her sack resting where his head had been. Reaching in, JT pulled out two weapons. He barely gave her a warning that he was tossing it her way before it was in the air, then at her feet, and she was diving after it and there were more shots fired and everything smelled like smoke and JT clawed at the ground, trying to pull himself up so he could run.

Something struck flesh. A male voice shouted in pain, and something large fell over in the woods, and Nat cursed. She was there, suddenly, beside him.

"I'm out," she grunted, grabbing his elbow and trying to make a break for cover. The phaser in her hand was dull, even the red blinking of an empty battery pack too much energy for the gun to put forth.

JT couldn't move fast enough. He tried to, god he tried, he tried to cover her body with his own, tried everything he could. He just couldn't think. Nothing in his body was working quite right and it was like trying to move your right hand and your left responds. He stumbled, and Nat paused to help him regain his footing, and then she was falling in a crumpled mess on the ground.

Everything moved too fast and molasses slow. Her face twisted up into some malformed mockery of a scream, and a black spot blossomed and grew in her abdomen. JT dropped to his knees beside her.

She wasn't breathing. She wasn't able to breathe. Her mouth was open, and she was making soft gasping sounds like she was trying to suck in air, but she couldn't. Something in the cavity that was her chest fluttered. Her diaphragm, exposed to the air and ripped free from the bones that anchored it in place, tried fruitlessly to fill her ruined lungs. She reached out and grabbed his hand, clenched around it hard enough his bones creaked.

How horrible was it, that she wasn't even given a chance for last words? Her grip on his hand was weakening, so JT held hers tighter. If he looked down, away from her eyes, he would be able to see into her abdomen. He didn't, couldn't look away.

Her body was slowly going slack, sinking into the ground in front of him. The last to go were her eyes, locked in on his, somehow simultaneously terrified and at peace in the type of contradiction only Nat was ever able to make sense of. Dark brown held his blue, both watery, both entirely out of their depths, until they just. Didn't. Anymore.

Her hand went lax and he lowered it down, set it gently on the forest floor beside her head.

He couldn't breathe. For a second he wondered if he'd been shot too, kind of wished he had. No, there was no gaping hole in his body, only a gaping hole in his soul where she was supposed to be.

A pair of torn and stained boots came to a stop at the edge of JT's vision. He blinked, and sucked in what felt like his first breath since he'd woken up. Slowly, his eyes rose up to meet those of the only other living person in the clearing.

The man was probably in his late 30's. He had short hair, dark brown peppered with greys that were most likely premature. His face was lean, skin sallow and unhealthy. At his side he held a phaser, loose grip like he knew JT wasn't in any shape to be a threat. He was sneering down at Nat, lips moving together like he was pooling saliva on his tongue and getting ready to spit.

In normal circumstances, he would be right. JT wasn't in any sort of shape to be a threat to anyone. But these weren't normal circumstances, and he already had a burning hole inside of him, and there was a knife still in his hand that the man hadn't seen.

His first strike was to the knee. The blade drove into the skin, digging deep in and then out until he felt the snap of a ligament rupturing. The man screamed, and his knee buckled. JT didn't pull back, just twisted his blade and let gravity do the work for him. The point of the knife sliced up, up, up the inside of the man's thigh to his groin. Right through the femoral artery.

Hot blood began flowing immediately, the handle of the knife slick and hard to hold in just a few seconds, doubly so as he flailed in agony.

JT pulled back, letting blood spray through the air and onto him, only to jolt forward again and slash at the man's wrist. The hand holding the phaser spasmed as the blade cut through more tendons and nerves, ending the function of the extremity. A second later he was scrambling back, gun gripped between both hands, brow furrowed and eyes wide, watching the grown man writhing and cursing on the ground in front of him.

The man's energy flagged quickly, until he was sprawled out on the ground, lethargic as the last of his lifeforce leached out of him. It only took a few minutes. Honestly, it was surprising how quickly an adult could bleed out from a cut artery. When the blood was still warm and soaking the soil, JT crawled back over to the two bodies.

It was surprising how quickly a malnourished, sleep-deprived fifteen-year-old could die from an abdominal wound, too. She was only fifteen, and he was only fourteen, and now she was dead and he was alive and how absolutely *fucked* was that.

He held her hand for who knows how long. Held it long past the heat leached out of her, until the sun was overhead and bearing down on him and her hand actually started warming up again. He even contemplated, for a brief second, giving her the proper burial she deserved, the type she'd told him about one of the many nights they spent huddled together and out of the elements. She wanted to be burnt on a funeral pyre, she'd said, cremated the good ol' fashioned way and leave nothing but a few scattered ashes behind. He wouldn't even be able to start a cookfire, not mention gather the brush necessary.

Eventually, he got up. Forced himself onto his feet and looked around the forest. It was nearly midday now, and the way the shadows fell on the ground told him which way was north, which way was back to his kids. The few kids he'd been able to keep alive, their numbers now even smaller. He grabbed her knapsack, tucked the half-full phaser he'd grabbed into the waist of his pants, and started walking.

His vision grew blurry and doubled. He kept walking. His shoes rubbed blisters into his feet, then ruptured them and left raw, oozing wounds. He kept walking. His eyes burned and his throat felt like sandpaper and his head pounded from dehydration, exasperated by the silent tears he shed. He kept walking. Contemplated going through the night, even, but his muscles physically forced him to stop when his legs could barely move anymore, at which point he propped himself up against a tree, rested his phaser in his lap, and drifted in and out of awareness for a measly five hours, got up as the sun began to rise and stuffed what remained of his food into his mouth as he walked. Halfway through his second day, he came across a stream to drink from, and filled his stomach until it hurt. Something smelled off about the creekbed where he initially ran across it, and he had to detour about 200 yards upstream to drink from above where a dead animal lay in the path of the water, rot and disease making its way downstream.

He kept walking.

From the city, it was a four-day walk for people of decent shape. When they'd set off, Nat and he'd expected it to take six. It had been a total of almost five days, the last two spent walking sun-up till sun-down, when JT started noticing landmarks.

First, the burn husk of a tree that had been struck by lightning, a familiar sight from walking perimeters and recon trips through the woods. Then a cluster of rocks, where T'raya and Mack had once pretended to be mountain goats and almost cracked their skulls open. There was a cluster of dead sticks that had once been a bush Sarah said stopped fevers, dusted with white powder, here a short patch of broad-leaved grasses that Luca weaved into bed mats and roofing. It had grown long and straggly.

JT's lungs felt sticky with the humidity this far into the forest. His vision wavered, and he had to pause and scrunch his eyes shut a few times before he could see straight again. He was close, he was so close to his kids. Against all odds, he'd managed to navigate through this jungle, over the span of five days, and now he was just a mile from salvation.

There was a small footpath carved through some of the undergrowth. JT would have never allowed the group to get so comfortable with a routine that they left a noticeable trail. He paused, crouched next to the tracks and felt the dirt. Based on the depth and detail of the footprints, the most recent bootprints weren't old at all, just an hour at most. They looked like a size 6. Callisto wore a size 6.

JT followed the footsteps, a newfound energy propelling him forward. He was so close, god, he could see them all in his mind's eye -

He broke through a cluster of branches and found himself facing a wary Callisto wielding a knocked bow. A second passed of breathless silence, both staring at each other as if not believing the events unfolding before them to be true. Then, with a burst of air, Callisto released the tension of the bowstring and threw his weapon aside, charging forward and throwing his lanky arms around JT's chest.

The contact jostled his bruised shoulder, sent a harsh bolt of pain through his abdomen and his head and a dozen other places, but JT just dropped to his knees and wrapped his own arms around the smaller boy.

“JT?” Callisto’s voice wavered.

“I’m here, I’m home and I’m never gonna leave you guys again,” he responded, clinging ever tighter to the other.

Eventually they drew apart, though JT made sure to keep a loose hold on Callisto’s shoulder, grounding both of them.

“Where- where’s Nat? Did she find you? Where were you for the past month? I have so many questions, everyone is gonna have so many questions. God I’m so glad you’re alive, JT.”

His stomach flopped at the idea of telling everyone she was dead. Something must have showed on his face, because Callisto sobered up a bit, nodding and grabbing JT’s hand from off his shoulder.

“We’ve got to get you back to camp. You look like you haven’t eaten anything in days, I’m sure Tom or T’lak can scrounge something up for you.”

After a moment of struggling to get to his feet, JT was led through the woods - this time no longer a true trail carved through the terrain, but still a hair more obvious than he preferred - and in the direction of the cave. Callisto tried to fill the silence with chatter, filling him in on everything that had happened while he was away, but all too soon he was caught up and there was little else to talk about besides what had happened to him in that month and, well, that was really only a story he wanted to tell once.

It took nearly an hour of walking, stumbling over rocks and roots and such, ignoring the looks cast at him every time he fumbled his step, before they came upon a clearing. There was a thin plume of smoke meandering up towards the open sky, the smell of roasting meat permeating the still air. Most of the grasses were dead, thankfully bereft of any fungus and just trampled into the dirt. At the mouth of the cave, Tom and Luca were prodding an open flame and slowly turning a small carcass on a spit. Kevin sat a few yards away, stacking rocks and ripping at the dead grass. Just within the shadow of the cave, T’raya was laying down, napping in the middle of the afternoon. T’lak wasn’t anywhere to be seen.

The second Callisto snapped a branch under his foot, three heads jerked up in their direction. Kevin was the first to react, letting out a loud squeal and scrambling towards his feet before charging in their direction. He slowed down a bit before reaching them, tiring out, but still managed to launch into JT’s legs with enough force he stumbled backwards.

He couldn’t even get words out through the sheer elation, babbling and squeezing tightly around his thigh. JT laughed, startling himself. Tom and Luca came forward slower, as if they didn’t believe what was before their eyes. Once within arms reach, Tom reached out and pulled JT into a tight hug, squeezing hard enough to force a grunt out of his lungs as his many injuries made themselves known again. Not one to be left out, Luca weaseled their way into the hug and clung onto JT’s t-shirt.

“How are you here right now?” Tom asked, not lifting his head from where it was pressed against JT’s scalp. His forehead was beginning to feel suspiciously damp, but he didn’t say anything.

“It’s... a long story. We should probably sit down so I only have to tell it once.”

As he was being led to the log that served as their bench, JT looked around. “Where’s T’lak? Last I heard she was taking charge of everything?”

Tom sighed, turning his back to JT for a second to pull the small rodent off the fire and slide it onto a rock slab.

“We got in a bit of an argument a little while ago, she went for a walk to cool off a bit. Should be back in an hour or so.”

“ *T’lak* needed to ‘cool down?’ Are we both talking about the same Vulcan?”

Tom turned back around, face grim and he handed JT the plate. “You getting taken changed a lot of things about a lot of us, JT.” He sighed and sat next to his friend. “But that’s enough about that. Want to tell your story now, or after you’ve eaten?”

“Might as well get it out of the way.” Kevin curled up against his side, pressing against the dark and swollen bruising on his abdomen. JT winced, but ignored the suspicious look Luca gave him.

“So I’m sure Nat told you about what happened at the guard outpost about a month ago. For the whole past month, I was being held by Kodos’ men in the capitol. They tried everything they could, but they never managed to get any information about you guys out of me...”

It took a while to catch them all up on what he’d been through. Though he did his best to keep the more graphic details from them, he wasn’t oblivious to the way Tom’s eye roved his frame, taking note of blemishes and bruises he otherwise might have overlooked, getting heavier the longer he looked. At some point Kevin fell asleep propped up against JT’s shoulder, leading them to talk in more hushed tones for a few minutes until the boy stirred again.

“... But Nat managed, somehow, to thwart the execution and started a riot to cover our tracks. We got out of the city and I finally actually started thinking I might get to see you all again.”

Things got real quiet again in the clearing. JT thought he heard something out in the woods, but when he tried straining his ears there were no sounds out of the ordinary.

Luca was the one to ask the question they were obviously all wondering. “Why isn’t she with you, JT?”

He sucked in a shallow breath, held it for a few seconds before expelling it. “We didn’t realize it at the time, but we picked up a tail heading out of the city.” At his time, Tom tensed, fists clenching before he was able to force them to relax again. JT nodded grimly.

“Yeah. Four of ‘em. Had she been alone, she might’ve been able to shake them, or pick them off one by one, but she was basically dragging my ass through the woods. We killed a couple, then thought we’d lost the rest and had to keep pushing forward. They caught up when we took a rest, and. Well, I’m sure you can guess the rest, right?”

“How did she...?” Callisto was the one to break the silence, then was immediately hushed by Tom’s absolutely murderous glare.

“Phaser blast. Ripped up her diaphragm, and probably a bunch of other shit, too.” JT blinked and realized he’d been fixated on the plate of now-cold meat in front of him for long enough that his eyes had dried out. He blinked again, ignoring the extra moisture pooling there.

“Good riddance.” A harsh voice spoke up from behind them. JT flinched, hard, jostling Kevin and almost fumbling the food in his hands. He whipped his head around and winced at both the burn in his muscles and the smouldering, angry expression T’lak was wearing.

“T’lak! You’re back, thank god, I’m so glad to see you-”

“Fuck you, JT.” She spat the words out, with more aggression than JT had ever felt coming from the Vulcan girl, more even than right after V’leris had died, or when they’d been chased out of their home by guards last spring.

“I- I don’t-”

“What, you leave your family to die for a month, then expect us all to welcome you back with open arms?” He’d never seen those angular eyebrows pulled down into such a severe frown before.

Tom stood up, positioning his body somewhat between JT and T’lak.

Protecting his brother from her.

“We’ve talked about this a dozen times. JT sacrificed himself, for all of us, and your anger is understandable but misdirected. It’s crossing a line to say what you just said about Nat, though.”

T’lak scowled, mouth opening to say something else hurtful, but JT beat her to it.

“I get it. I know what Nat told me, that you and her weren’t on great terms when she left the camp to find me. And I know you, I know you think I chose the easy way out, so I could just die and not have to deal with taking care of the group and living this hellish life. It’s okay to be angry at me. I deserve it, probably.”

“JT, no-”

He cut Luca off before they could say anything else.

“But that was the hardest call of my life. Letting Nat run back to you guys while I had to stay, fighting those guards? God I wanted to tell her to stay instead. But I knew, if one of us was taken alive, I’d be able to hold out longer than she would. And when Kodos had me in his basement, playing stupid little mind games with me, not giving in and dying was the second hardest. I did not take the easy way out, I need you to believe me. And Nat didn’t take the easy way out letting me stay behind, either, nor did she when she got herself killed by those men. I know you know it is so fucking hard taking care of this family, and so hard to give up

on it too. So don't you dare say she deserved to die, and don't you dare say I don't deserve to live."

She didn't say anything, just glared and clenched her jaw. JT sighed, stood up and faced her.

"Now can you please put your anger aside and let me hug you? Because I missed you so goddamn much."

He opened his arms and waited one second, two, before she fell forward like a marionette doll with its strings cut into his embrace.

"I'm still mad at you, you know."

"I know."

"I mean it."

"I know, honey."

Chapter End Notes

I'm not sure if any of you care about my OCs the way I do, but this chapter was both a lot of fun and really painful to write! I've got another chapter finished that concludes this story, that I'll try to post some time this week. After that I'll mark this fic and complete, though I will continue to add to the series! I feel kinda bad because I've had these two chapters finished for quite a while, but just forgot to post them... Whoops!

Is This Salvation, or the Next Level of Hell?

Chapter Summary

JT has returned, bruised and bloodied - and alone - to his kids. He knows he won't survive much longer given his injuries, but when a new threat emerges he is sure as hell gonna go down swinging.

Chapter Notes

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

After reuniting with the group, and sharing a fragment of the hell the past month had been with them, JT found it hard to stay still. His skin crawled, like hundreds of eyes were fixed on him, and he kept twitching at every shadow that passed over the clearing. For a little while he was able to relax with Callisto and Kevin and Tom while Luca took up patrol duty. He was able to eat, and drink, and pretend everything was okay again - or as okay as things had ever been on Tarsus. At some point T'raya woke up from her nap, disoriented and too lethargic for JT's liking, and crawled into his lap without any questions. For an 8 year old she was tiny, too light and boney where she was draped across his thighs. She fell back asleep too easily, too, her every breath rasping like Reyceh's had before he died.

One look at Tom told him all he needed to know, what he'd missed in his month-long hiatus.

Eventually T'lak came and scooped up the younger Vulcan, giving JT a nod before retreating to the cave for the night. There was nothing on the spit to cook, no scavenged fruits or nuts to eat, and JT looked at the stone slab he'd been given earlier. Without a thought he'd eaten everything he'd been given, the equivalent of a whole squirrel for himself. Just the bones remained, grizzly bits of cartilage and ligaments clinging where he hadn't fully given into his animalistic hunger and stripped the whole carcass. He wondered if the marrow would taste just as heavenly as he remembered.

Dusk fell and the group around the fire got quieter, their conversations drifting off as the fire began burning down to the embers. The moon was full overhead, the sky clear. At some point JT laid down on the dirt and stared up at the stars. Luca laid down beside him, their hand finding his own and clinging tightly.

The night sky on Tarsus had always been beautiful, no one could deny that. Wherever he was, JT was drawn to the stars and the cosmos, and here had been no different. Something about the reminder that he was never alone, not really. It had become a common sight in the camp to see him sprawled out and staring at the sky, more often than not joined by Luca or Callisto - the latter felt connected to them by both birthright, his family a long line of space-farers, and himself named after a moon. The former was more like JT, drawn to the vastness of the universe itself and longing to explore the dark when they grew up. Tonight, though, they just

watched the tiny pin-pricks of light up above twinkle, occasionally pointing out made up constellations. Tarsus was frequently visited by asteroids and meteors, due to the relatively small size of its star, and tonight was no different - a long streak of fire crossed overhead, brighter than most. A meteorite spiraling down and burning up before it could hit the ground.

“Make a wish,” Luca murmured, the first words spoken in near an hour.

JT scoffed, squeezing their hand in his grasp. “I wish I could see you in ‘Fleet blues.”

“What makes you think I’d go into science?”

He couldn’t help but laugh a bit at that. “”If you were going to join StarFleet, you wouldn’t go into Engineering or Security. That just leaves security, command, nav, or science. No offense, but I don’t think you’d enjoy wearing gold. Blue is more your color.”

Luca chuckled alongside him for a moment. “In all honesty, I don’t know if I could. After everything that’s happened here... Where’s the federation been in all of this?”

JT didn’t have an answer.

An hour later Luca began drifting off into sleep, and JT had to nudge them a few times before they relented, getting up and going to join the rest of the group under shelter.

He sat up, leaning against one of the logs they’d been sitting on earlier. The fire pit was just a dull, glowing red at this point. The clearing was washed out with the cold light reflected by the one full moon. It didn’t feel real.

He lost time. He didn’t know how much, how long he’d been sitting there adrift, but he was jolted back into his skin when Tom settled down next to him. The rest of the world was silent, just a few creatures making their way through the woods, the occasional rustle of a warm body turning over inside the cave. Tom’s steady breathing to his left.

“How bad was it, really?”

“What part? The trek through the woods fucking sucked, especially after... ya know. The way she went was horrible, too, if that’s what you mean, and I’m gonna have to live with it being my fault for the rest of my life. Being on stage next to Kodos for a second time wasn’t great either-”

“JT, trying to distract me won’t work.”

He didn’t say anything.

“What did they do to you? A whole month alone with him... I can’t imagine what you had to deal with...”

"I don't want to talk about it." JT clenched his jaw, eyes fixed on a single log in the fire that glowed red-hot.

Tom sighed, a heavy thing, like the weight of the world was pressing down on his collarbones. "You always try to carry everyones burdens, JT. It's not fair. Why won't you let me help you? Don't you trust me?"

"What do you want to hear?" JT whipped his head around, fists clenched, shoulders squared like he could fight his way out of this conversation. "Do you want to hear about how I had to face the man who basically wrote us all off as disposable, every day, and hear him tell me about how he was going to kill all you, one by one, in front of me? Or how he wore gloves when he beat me so he didn't get blood under his fingernails? Maybe you want to hear about how he let his scientists use me like a fucking lab rat, playing with torture devices and laughing when I screamed so hard my throat bled." Tom had shrunk back into himself at this point, cringing away from the explosion of energy that JT didn't even know he still had in him. It was like his mouth was running away from him, though, and he couldn't hold back the ugly truth from spewing out like blood from an artery.

"I know what it feels like to have my hand move without my control, when they cut my arm open and played with my nerves, comparing my anatomy to their stupid books. I got thrown in a saltwater tank for days on end - or, honestly, I don't know how long it was because I wasn't able to *feel anything*. It was *hell*, it was a *vacuum*, and then they dumped me out of the tank and didn't let me sleep for days. Should I keep going? Have I shared enough for you?"

There was something wet dripping down JT's cheek. He swiped at it, looking down at his fingertips with bright red superimposed over the tears. And there were hands reaching for him and grabbing and he couldn't suppress the flinch that sent him into the bright red embers and -

"Sssh, ssh, I'm sorry, I'm sorry JT, it's ok. You're ok."

Those hands were stroking his hair and pulling him off the coals, and though his limbs shook and his lungs were too-full and not-full-enough he let them guide him to stable ground. He sat, head in his hands, for who knows how long. Tom's hands - like irons, scalding - a constant pressure on his shoulders. Eventually he came back to himself, and eventually he whispered 'sorry' into the cool air, and eventually Tom shook his head and told him he had nothing to apologize for. Eventually Tom trusted JT when he told the other boy to go get some rest, the dark bags under his eyes couldn't be healthy and JT was home, finally, and he just wanted to keep an eye out for a little bit while everyone else slept.

And so JT sat, at the mouth of the cave staring out at the forest as the nocturnal animals crawled into their burrows and birds started stirring and the first smidgen of sunlight started turning the sky gray.

A branch in the woods snapped. His head jerked up from where he'd been staring at the firepit, contemplating feeding the few glowing coals and trying to get it burning again. There were plenty of diurnal animals in these woods, he reasoned with himself. Or maybe T'lak had managed to slip past him and went on patrol, and she was just coming back.

Or, maybe not. Another branch broke, this time closer to the clearing. There was a weird chirping sound in the brush as well, synthetic in a way that made the hair on the back of JT's

neck stand up. He shifted to his feet, careful to avoid the patches of leaf litter or dried grass that would make noise. Callisto was closest to the entrance, and made a soft sleepy sound when his foot was nudged. JT's hand came up and covered the boy's mouth, and dark brown eyes met blue, both suddenly wide awake.

In just 30 seconds everyone was up, watching as JT conveyed what he knew with hand motions. He paused, turning his head so an ear was oriented towards the clearing, listening as leaves crumpled not far off. He swallowed, throat protesting and he knew there were still dark purple bruises around it from being strangled days prior.

He turned back to the group. With a deep breath, trying to muster up some courage to do just this one last thing for his kids, he reached into his waistband and pulled out the phaser he'd picked up off Nat's killer.

T'lak stepped forward, holding her own weapon. JT's face hardened, and he nodded.

Without speaking, they took up stations just outside of the cave. There was no tunnel that would lead everyone out safely, so they had to keep the threat away from the rest of his kids and distracted for long enough for them to escape. Just beyond the clearing, just in the shadows and cover provided by some of the brush that still managed to grow, JT heard voices.

God, how many of them had he led back to his kids? How had he not heard them?

JT thumbed the safety of his phaser, hesitating just a second before flipping it to kill. No room for mercy, no room for redemption. He heard T'lak just a few yards away power up hers as well.

"We don't mean you any harm," called out a voice from the bushes. JT flinched, and T'lak startled badly enough that she fired off a stray shot into the tree canopy.

The air was heavy, frozen.

"Put your weapons down and we'll come out. I promise you, we aren't going to hurt you," a different voice spoke. JT rolled his eyes, and no one moved.

"Fuck this," one of them said, after two minutes passed and there was no sign of movement or weapon-lowering. Twigs snapped and a man emerged from behind a small pile of rocks, further to JT's left than he'd expected. He swung his phaser around, aiming down the sights at the...

Starfleet officer. The bright red uniform stood out against the bleak color scheme of Tarsus. His hair was well maintained, styled with product, and his face was free of any type of facial hair. His hands were empty, and held palm-up to signal good intentions.

JT brushed his thumb up the side of his phaser and adjusted his grip, and pulled the trigger.

The man fell backwards and hit the ground, hard, and didn't get up.

T'lak cried out, cursing colorfully, and JT looked over to see her with her back against stone and staring down the barrel of a phaser. The woman holding the weapon wore gold and a nasty sneer. JT didn't hesitate to shoot at her, too, though his shot went wide and only barely singed her auburn ponytail.

She jerked back, wide eyes meeting JT's and giving T'lak just enough time to execute a nerve pinch. He twitched at the memory of her practicing that move on him, and while she wasn't quite proficient yet, it worked most of the time.

Another officer on the ground.

T'lak tried to pick up her phaser and fell back into the wall of the cave, mouth open in a silent shout and a bright red burn spreading on her shoulder.

JT's breath caught, heart stuttering as he stared at the Vulcan girl for a second too long. Another beam of energy struck the tree he'd been using for cover and he was startled back into action, though everything seemed much colder than it had been a moment ago.

The one who'd shot her was standing at the edge of the clearing, leaning halfway out from behind a tree of their own. Swallowing down the urge to scream and cry and charge, JT took aim.

"Who are you?" JT called out. His voice was hoarse and dry, and cracked halfway through his question. It didn't lessen the venom he spat at them.

"I'm Lieutenant Erin Chatham, Chief of Security. I'm with Starfleet." Their voice was hard, but that was to be expected, since they'd seen two of their personnel get shot.

"What ship?"

A pause, like the question was unexpected. "USS Clement. Under Captain Joshua Cameron."

JT scoffed. "The hell is an Apollo-class doing out by Tarsus? This isn't exactly 'deep space.'"

"You seem to know your ships, kid. Who are you, exactly?" A shift in the leaves, like someone was walking around. JT glanced out the corner of his eye but couldn't see any movement.

He didn't bother answering their question. "Why are you here?"

"The on-board computer picked up your heat signals, and we were able to beam down close enough to use our own handheld systems."

There was that noise again. Someone wasn't good at covering their footsteps, and they were getting close to the cave. Close to his kids.

"Helpful, but that's not what I meant. Why is the 'fleet here, on Tarsus?"

Chatham took a few seconds to answer. “We received a distress signal. There were a couple hiccups getting here, which is why it took so long. We’re here to help.”

The hollow pit in his stomach fluttered. It seemed he’d succeeded, he actually managed to get the signal out there. He pushed down the hope that threatened to blossom.

“We don’t want your fucking help. Your ‘help’ killed T- my friend.”

JT jerked to the side just in time to see a red shirt creep out and make a move for the officer in gold. “Ah ah ah, don’t even fucking think about it.”

The redshirt stilled, hands up in a surrender.

“Look, kid, you don’t have to fight us. Just let Morris get my navigator out of there and we can keep talking, all nice and civil.”

The redshirt, Morris, nodded and did his best to look harmless.

“It’s been a while since I did ‘civil.’ I don’t think I’m very good at it, to be honest.”

JT pulled his trigger. Morris slumped over, almost collapsing on T’lak. JT turned back to Chatham.

The battery light of his phaser blinked red and faded out.

He didn’t waver, kept the barrel pointing straight at the Lieutenant.

“Jesus christ, kid! We don’t want to fucking hurt you, stop shooting my people!”

JT couldn’t help rolling his eyes. “Give him a couple hours and he’ll be right as rain. Will my friend have the same luck?”

“She’ll be fine. You’ll all be fine, if you just put down the phaser and let us take you aboard. We’ve got doctors who can help-”

JT flinched, violently, dropping his weapon from the shudder that coursed across his nerves at the thought of white trench coats and labs and needles-

Someone was moving toward him from across the clearing. He forced his body to move, ignoring the way the stitches along his left forearm burned and his ribs screamed and everything protested. He managed to grab the phaser T’lak had dropped and forced himself to his feet, thumbing the safety to stun. He stood in front of the entrance to the cave, feeling the burn of four sets of eyes on his back and staring down the six starfleet officials in front of him.

“You’re not getting to them,” he growled.

Chatham stood in front of their officers, phaser aimed at his chest. Their eyes were wide as they took in JT’s appearance, but their mouth was set in a firm line.

“Stand down, kid.” JT didn’t budge an inch. “I don’t want to shoot you, but you need to let us pass.”

A feral noise was building up in his chest. They were all inching closer to him, and he felt his heartbeat ramping up as they closed in. His eyes darted from face to face. He knew T’lak’s phaser hadn’t had much more juice than his had, he wouldn’t be able to take down six full-grown adults. He adjusted his grip, and shifted onto the balls of his feet.

“Mora, Stevens-” Chatham didn’t get the chance to finish what they were saying as JT darted forward as fast as his broken body would let him. He managed to shoot one of the other officers in gold, and clipped one in red enough to get him off his balance, before one of them managed to grab hold of him.

They grabbed his wrist and pulled up. It was the arm that had recently been dislocated, and JT bit down bile that tried to come up with the pain. They squeezed, trying to make him drop his phaser, and rather than try to fight it he did.

Then he caught the phaser as it came down at him, palm burning as he gripped the barrel before he surged up and whipped it across their cheek. Something crunched under the heavy metal and they stumbled back, letting him go. JT ducked down, trying to adjust his hold on the phaser so he could fire again while also drawing the small blade from his thigh holster. He hissed as a phaser beam struck the dirt at his feet, crouching and eying up the remaining officers. Two down, four to go.

Chatham was glaring at him, their eyes devoid of the pity they’d been feeling a few moments ago. Good, JT didn’t want anyone’s pity. He wanted to be left *alone*. He sneered, showing off the spaces where teeth had fallen out without shame.

Arms wrapped around his ribcage the next second. Someone had managed to get behind him without his knowing it, and he wasn’t able to hold back the guttural scream at having broken ribs squeezed. There was blood in his throat and on his lips. He couldn’t breath, couldn’t suck in any air as he tried to gasp and wheeze through the pain. The pressure didn’t let up and it felt like there were shards of bone being forced through his skin and for a second he wished he was back in Kodos’ basement-

There was a knife in his hand. Well, now there was a knife in the thigh of whoever was holding him. They let go, shouting at being stabbed, and JT wanted to raise his phaser and shoot Chatham right in their ugly face. Instead, he slumped forward on his knees, still trying to suck air into lungs that he was pretty sure were now punctured. He spit a mouthful of thin, bright red blood onto the scuffed black boots that stood in front of him.

It seemed like it was just him and Chatham in the clearing - he could see the bottom hem of gold pants hitting the ankles of the boots. The other officers had left him, incapacitated as he was. There was a scream, high and reedy, that echoed out of the cave, the sound of fists hitting flesh and the startled grunt of a red shirt being hit by Kevin’s flailing arms. Then phaser fire, and it went quiet. JT squeezed his eyes shut, trying to block out the sound of Tom begging them not to shoot T’raya.

Fingers threaded through JT's hair, catching on knots and mats and tugging at his scalp before fisting the dirty blond locks. They lifted his head up, pulling until JT was looking at their hardened expression. Chatham was frowning, eyes lingering on the blood at the corner of JT's mouth before locking with his gaze.

"I know you've been through some shit down here, kid, but you've hurt a lot of my men today. So I hope you don't take it personally, but I'm not about to take any chances transporting you while you're conscious."

They raised their phaser, pausing to check that safety was set to stun and showing it to JT for good measure.

Then they shot him in the chest, and all JT could feel was red heat and then-

Rough fabric beneath his hands. Unsteady, fitful beeping. The smell of sterile alcohol. A faint humming. Something cold around his wrists and ankles.

Chapter End Notes

This is it. The final installment - chronologically - to The Many Names and Faces of James Tiberius Kirk. It has been a wild, bumpy ride, but I'm so happy we made it! I have so much more written, and even more planned, for this series, but I wanted to at least post the conclusion for you all. If you've been following for a while, thank you. If you just found this fic, thank you. I appreciate all of you readers and hope you enjoyed this little world I've been playing around in. I love hearing from you, so please drop a comment below!

End Notes

Hey all! I hope you enjoy this piece I'm writing. I love putting my favs through horrible situations, and I hope you are all enjoying reading about it. If you have any ideas of scenes you might want to see set in this universe, feel free to drop them in a comment and I might write it! Or feel free to tell me how you feel about a chapter, about the characters, anything. It truly means the world to me when you comment and leave kudos.

Also this series is definitely not in chronological order, I'll keep an updated timeline posted in the series notes! I hope you enjoy reading this with me, feel free to let loose all your emotions in the comments, or message me on tumblr at megmachine to yell about Star Trek together! Hope everyone is staying safe and healthy <3

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