### Tarsus IV

**Summary**

The guards started firing into the crowd.

People were screaming—children were screaming—and flesh was burning and the building was burning and smoke was filling the air and it smelled like cooked meat. Jim’s stomach growled, and the only thing that kept him from stopping to throw up was the knowledge that it would get him shot.
It started as whispers. Rumors. The odd, misplaced word spoken during class and quickly dismissed.

Then the whispers got louder. Then people were banging on the doors of the governor’s palace demanding answers. Then there were riots in the colony and things set on fire and some people got hurt.

A farm caught fire and whole fields burned down in the blink of an eye and then there was even less food.

Kodos tried to send out a distress signal. It didn’t work. Something about ion storms and background interference and long distance comms being unreliable.

Some people said that he only claimed he sent out a distress signal and in reality he was keeping Tarsus IV cut off from the Federation intentionally, his own private empire where he was the final authority, refusing to ask for help in order to fuel his own god complex. Jim couldn’t believe that. He knew Kodos. Kodos was nice to him. He taught him how to play chess. How can a governor be that involved with their citizens and still have people thinking the worst of him?

In truth, Kodos could do no wrong in Jim’s eyes. The man was like a father to him.

He started with the criminals.

Two days after Jim got out of juvie. He had been so hungry and he was thirteen and stupid, and so he had stolen a candy bar and got caught. It nearly got him killed.

His neighbor’s oldest kid wasn’t so lucky. He had stolen food for his little brother and been executed for it. His mother cried for days.

Desperate times called for desperate measures. There were too many people consuming too much food. Kodos had declared all criminal offenses to be death penalty offenses.

That went against dozens of Federation laws and legal protections, but what was anybody going to do about it?

The next to go were the disabled, mentally and physically. Jim very nearly didn’t make the cut, with all his allergies and his immune system being what it was. It was his off-the-charts aptitude tests that saved him. That, and his famous father.

Kodos expected great things out of him. He always had.

It still hadn’t sunk in. It was still some distant, not-real thing, that Jim was only concerned about on the periphery. Kodos was a good man. He was only doing what he had to do. It was necessary. It was logical.

What alternative was there? Let everybody starve?
There were still some people defending Kodos and Jim was one of them.

Age limits were drawn. No one over 65 or under 18 was allowed to live.

It was simple logic, really. The elderly were a burden on the colony. Kids were a burden. Teenagers ate way, way too much, and no matter how much work they were made to do, they consumed more than their fair share. People so old or so young that they needed others to look after them… The gains just weren’t worth the costs.

It made perfect sense when you thought about it, really.

Kodos called an assembly at the colonial school. All the children filed into the gym and took their seats, waiting to hear their leader speak.

“As you all know, an exotic fungus has come to our colony and infected our crops. All of the planet’s food supplies are now diseased and inedible. Communication is impossible. The next Federation check-up isn’t scheduled for another five years.

“The revolution is successful. But survival depends on drastic measures. Your continued existence represents a threat to the more valued members of society. Therefore, I have no alternative but to sentence you to death. Your execution is so ordered, signed Kodos, Governor of Tarsus IV.”

The guards started firing into the crowd.

People were screaming—children were screaming—and flesh was burning and the building was burning and smoke was filling the air and it smelled like cooked meat. Jim’s stomach growled, and the only thing that kept him from stopping to throw up was the knowledge that it would get him shot.

He ran out the doors with a crowd of other kids and the guards kept firing after them. The kid in front of Jim went down, and he jumped over his falling body, heart pounding at the delay.

Another kid fell at his side and another and another.

They were clear of the school, clear of the colony, still sprinting into the woods, adrenaline carrying them far past their normal breaking points. The sound of phaserfire and the smell of smoke became distant. The guards didn’t follow them off the school grounds.

There were still kids to be taken care of inside. And nature would run its course with the kids who made it to the woods. As long as they weren’t eating food from the colony, nobody cared.

A big kid went down with a sudden cry, clutching at his face. Jim peered around, but there were no guards in sight. He stopped and knelt down beside him. Some of the other kids followed his cue. A good portion, actually.

“What’s wrong? What happened?” Jim asked. Too in pain to speak, the kid moved his hand away to reveal a massive phaser burn covering half his face and seeping blood. His left eye was completely gone, a massive dripping with gore. The eye appeared to have exploded from the heat like a squished grape. His skin was a mangled, half-melted mess, rippled and red and raw and emanating the most disgusting smell. Several kids gasped. One ran over to a bush and retched.
Jim set his mouth grimly and tore off his shirt, wrapping it round the other kid’s face as a makeshift bandage. It covered it completely. The kid had to resort to breathing through his mouth. It was the only way to cover the entire wound, though.

“Here, take my hand. I’ll guide you,” he said, slipping his hand into the older boy’s. They started walking again, and the rest of the kids followed.

Somehow Jim ended up leading.

They set up camp.

Camp was a clearing in the woods about three miles away from the colony. It took them two hours to get a fire lit, even though multiple kids insisted they knew how to build one.

Jim led the wounded boy to a log and sat down with him. Soon all the remaining kids were sitting in a circle around the fire, solemn-faced and silent.

“What are we gonna do?” a little girl asked.

Nobody said anything. Jim looked down at his hands, watching the firelight make shadows play off of them.

He felt eyes on him and looked up, startled, to find everybody staring at him.

“Um,” he said. “I guess we’ll stay here for the night. We can come up with a long-term plan in the morning? For now, we’re all tired and need to sleep.”

A couple of kids nodded. “What’s your name?” one asked.

“JT,” he said. “That’s a good idea. We should probably—Do you guys wanna stick together? We can help each other out.”

More nods.

He took a breath. “Okay. Um. We should probably all know each other’s names, then. And ages. Why don’t we, uh, go around in a circle?” he said, feeling slightly ridiculous. He sounded like a teacher. “I’m JT and I’m thirteen.”

The kid with the wrapped head went next. “Tom Leighton. Fifteen.”

“My name is Angela Martin and I’m seven years old.”

“Uh, Jen. Jenny Tyler. I’m twelve.”

“Tamara Sinclair. Fourteen.”

“My name is Kevin. Riley. Kevin Riley. I’m five.”

“I’m Dani. I’m nine. This is my brother Hunter, and he’s eight. He’s mute.”

“I’m Bobbi. I’m nine too.”
“Gavin Drewes. Fifteen.”

“My name’s Shravan. I’m thirteen.”

“I’m Erin Molson and I’m eleven.”

Thirteen kids total. Thirteen kids.

Jim could keep thirteen kids alive.
The older kids stayed up talking while the younger ones slept.

“We need a plan for food,” Tamara said.

“Yeah? Like what?” Gavin asked.

“We could steal,” Jim suggested.

“From starving people?” Shravan asked.

“Hey, we’re starving too,” he shrugged.

“Kid’s got a point. Survival of the fittest. I think Kodos has made that pretty clear,” Tom said dryly.

“Great, so we steal,” Jim said. “Daylight robbery. Hit while all the adults are at work.”

“What work? This is a farming colony, and the farms are dying,” Gavin said.

“Not everybody is a farmer, though. There still has to be teachers, and plumbers, and carpenters, and janitors, and… all kinds of people,” Tamara said. “We can at least one house that’s empty and sneak in without anyone even seeing.”

“Okay,” Gavin said, folding his arms. “But who’s gonna do it?”

“Well, can’t be me,” Tom said, gesturing to his bandage-shirt-blindfold. It was now soaked through with blood and keeping the remnants of his eye from falling out. “But it has to be one of us. We can’t send in a little kid.”

“I am not doing it,” Gavin said defiantly.

Shravan bit her lip and looked around nervously. “I, uh—“

“It’s okay,” Tamara said. “JT and I’ll handle it. Ain’t that right, JT?”

He gave a crooked grin. “Sure. I’d love to.”

They watched the woman get into her hovercar from the bushes. The engine revved, and it lifted off the ground and carried her away. Jim and Tamara snuck out of the bushes and sprinted low to the ground to the door.

“Shit,” Tamara hissed. “Security lock. We’ll never get in.”

“Yes we will. I can hack it.”

“Are you sure? If you set off the alarm—“

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“Are you sure? If you set off the alarm—“
“I can hack it,” he said confidently. He slipped off the outer casing and set to work, fingers flying across the keys, pulling wires and rearranging them occasionally. In two minutes, the panel beeped and a green light came on. The door swished open.

“Great! Let’s get in, grab some food, and get out before the neighbors call the cops,” Tamara said.

They dashed into the kitchen and began raiding the cupboards, pulling out cans and boxes of food and stuffing their shirts with them. They were just about to leave when suddenly the woman ran back in, phaser drawn, and on instinct Jim chucked a can at her.

It hit her in the head and she went down, head slamming back into the wall, onto the floor, and blood pooling out around her. Jim clapped a hand over his mouth.

“I didn’t mean to!” he said. “I swear I didn’t mean to! I never would have—Oh my god!”

“JT,” Tamara grabbed him by the shoulders. “Shut up. Calm down. Pick that food back up. We need to leave.”

He nodded shakily and went to do as she said.

A baby cried.

“Shiiit,” Tamara said. Jim’s mouth dropped open, tears threatening to spill out of his eyes.

Tamara’s mouth set in a grim line. “We’ll have to make two trips.”

They dumped their stolen food in the center of the camp, just to the side of the fire, and the other kids cheered.

“Hey, wait, where are you going?” Jenny asked.

“Back. We left some stuff there,” Tamara said.

“Isn’t that—a bit risky?” Tom asked.

“Just trust us. We have to,” Jim said.

They came back with more food and a baby.

“What is that?” Gavin asked.

“What’s it look like?” Jim asked.

“Guys, I can’t see. What’s going on?” Tom asked.

“They brought back a fucking baby! Where’d you even get that thing?”

“The house we robbed,” Jim said.

“It’s a long story,” Tamara said.
“We got time,” Gavin said.

Jim bit his lip and looked at the ground. Tamara tried to catch his eyes, couldn’t, and told the story herself.

The camp went silent.

Little Kevin looked around in confusion. “So what’s the baby’s name?”

“We’re not naming it!” Gavin said.

“Why not?” Jenny asked, hands on her hips.

“Because it’s not ours! We don’t need another mouth to feed!”

“So what do you propose we do? Just leave her to die?” Jim asked.

“That’s what you did with her mother, isn’t it?”

He reeled back as if slapped.

“Hey!” Tom snapped. “Let’s not go there. What JT did was an accident. And like it or not, this kid is our responsibility now.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t name her though,” Shravan said, surprising everyone. “I mean… It’s just—she’s so little. I feel like—like maybe she won’t last long enough to need a name.” She was looking down at the ground by the time she finished.

Jim looked at the little baby in his arms and held her tighter.

“How about for now we call her Baby?” Dani said.

Things were okay for the next week. No one came by and bothered them. They didn’t run into any of the other kids who had made it out or any adults. They stayed in their little camp and ate dry oatmeal and uncooked noodles. They found a fast-running stream not too far off and got water from it.

Jenny and Dani quickly became best friends. Tom took to taking care of Baby as his way of contributing. Shravan wrote poetry in the notebook she had in her backpack from school and shared some of it if you went up to talk to her. Erin tried to make a homemade knife out of a rock she sharpened and a short stick.

For a while, things were okay.

Then they ran out of food.

“We could try to rob someone again,” Jim said.

“Right, because that went so well last time,” Gavin rolled his eyes.
“Hey, we got food, didn’t we?” Jenny said.

“Yeah, and a baby! Someone died!”

“That won’t happen again,” Jim said. “And do you have a better idea?”

“Yeah, actually,” Gavin said. “We go out to the fields and steal from those. It’s much safer.”

“That food’s all diseased though,” Tamara said.

“It’s just a little fungus. We can scrape it off and it’ll be fine. Like eating around the brown part on a banana.”

“Sure, if the brown part were mold,” Erin said.

“It’s not mold,” Jim said.

“See?” Gavin crowed.

“That doesn’t mean I think it’s safe,” he added.

“Well, whatever. This isn’t a fucking democracy, and nobody here is in charge. I think it’ll be fine, and so I’m gonna eat it, and then you’re all gonna eat your words.”

Gavin got sick. Bad sick. He was shaking and feverish and sweating. His skin was flushed red and hot to the touch. He kept vomiting up nothing.

The other children avoided him like the plague.

He died alone three days later.

The kids dug a pit and dragged his body into it. Tom stood over it, rocking Baby, and cleared his throat.

“Here lies Gavin Drewes. He was a nice guy. Sort of. I mean! Um. He was a nice guy. We’re all going to miss him. And I’m sure his family will too,” he said. “May he rest in peace.”

“May he rest in peace,” some of them echoed. Angela threw a few dandelions on top of the body.

They covered it with dirt.

Jim woke up that night to the sound of something being eaten. Sloppy, wet chewing and tearing. Flesh being rended.

He sat up with a jolt.

There were three wild dogs tearing into Gavin’s body. Feasting.

“No!” he cried, leaping up and running towards them. “No no no no no!”
Other kids started waking up and shouting similarly when they saw what was happening. They beat the dogs back with sticks and yelling and a log from the fire.

But it was too late. Gavin’s body was a mess. The putrid stench of death was everywhere. His intestines and organs were spilling out, weak skin flayed and torn, muscles shredded and half-eaten underneath. His throat was missing.

Angela started crying, and Tamara ushered her away, shushing and comforting.

Now they knew why people were always buried at least six feet under.
They ate grass.

Grass fucking sucks.

They started getting jumpy with each other. Agitated. On edge. It was weird because the hunger didn’t seem that bad anymore. Jim knew in his head that that was a very bad sign. But he couldn’t bring himself to care. He felt less hungry.

And really, wasn’t that a good thing?

They weren’t drinking as much either. Didn’t feel thirsty for some reason. Their skin got dry and cracked, and they all had to go to the bathroom a lot less. They were all so sleepy too.

Things mattered less and less. Drinking didn’t matter. Eating didn’t matter. They went through the motions when they could, and barely that.

Angela got scurvy.

Her mouth got all kinds of messed up. At first they thought she was just losing baby teeth. But then she was losing far too many and her gums looked weird and so did her tongue. Her skin was cracked and bleeding all over and covered in bruises, the slightest bump injuring her way more than it should and then simply not healing.

It takes eight to twelve weeks to fully starve to death. They had no intention of letting it get that far.

They engineered traps in a wide perimeter around the camp. They caught a couple of squirrel-like things and one native creature that was a bit similar to a rabbit.

They ate squirrels. They drank water. They ate grass. It wasn’t enough. They were all suffering from malnutrition within a month.

They needed more food.

Jim led Tom by the hand over to the stream. Tom carefully peeled the bloodstained shirt off his face, wincing as he went. He dipped the thing in the water and washed it clean, scrubbing for a solid fifteen minutes to get all the dried blood off.

Wordlessly, he handed the shirt over to Jim.

He picked it up and carefully dabbed at the older boy’s face, gently washing blood away. He cleared all of it off his face, his throat, his ear, some of it was in his hair. He gave the gave the empty eye socket a wide berth, and handed the shirt back.

Tom rinsed it off again and then tried to clean his wound. He hissed and pulled the shirt away. Stoically, he steeled himself and tried again. He dabbed into the socket and grit his teeth, cleaning with feather-light touches.
He washed the blood off the shirt for the third time and wrapped the soaking cloth back around his head. Jim dimly registered that that had to be cold. Tom was probably going to catch a head cold. That was just what he needed.

“You’re gonna need a better bandage,” Jim said.

“Yeah, you probably want your shirt back, don’t you?”

“No, that’s not what I meant. I mean—we need to do something about your eye or it’s going to get infected.”

Tom grimaced. “Do you see any dermal regenerators lying around?”

Jim, Dani, and Hunter were checking the traps and wandering around. It was a good excuse to get out of the camp. It was a chore and it was gruesome and it sucked, but it beat sitting around and thinking about how hungry they were.

Jim slung a low-crawling mammal of some sort over his shoulder. Dani was carrying three dead squirrels, and Hunter was on the lookout for any predators or prey that might be lurking around, as he was the most observant one in the camp, even more so than Shravan.

Suddenly, he tugged on his sister’s sleeve and started signing rapidly. Dani passed off her squirrels to Jim and replied.

“What? What’s going on?” he asked. Dani put a finger to her lips and glared sternly. Jim took the hint.

Hunter started creeping towards the base of the mountain, and the other two followed. He led the children to a cave hidden partially by a large bush.

Dani got ready the spear Erin had made for her, hoisting it up, poised to strike. Jim looked around and grabbed a big rock.

They snuck into the cave. Their footsteps were mouse-silent and slow going, careful, cautious. Hunter put a hand up and they all came to a stop.

There was a massive creature curled up in deep slumber at the back of the cave. It had thick gray fur and a long snout and the general physique of a bear, but slightly more wolfish. It was huge, bigger than the three of them combined. It would take at least five kids to carry its corpse back to the camp. Its meat would be enough to feed them all for weeks.

Dani threw the spear.

It bounced off the creature’s back and it blinked awake, eyes latching onto them.

“Run!” Jim shrieked. He whipped the rock at the bear-wolf as hard as he could, and the thing growled and stood to chase them. The kids sprinted out of the cave like their lives depended on it.

They were running, weaving around trees and jumping over logs and rocks and running. The bear-wolf was gaining on them with every bound. They weren’t gonna make it. They weren’t gonna
make it. They weren’t gonna—

Hunter tripped.

The creature was on him in an instant, and Jim heard a sickening crack as it snapped through the eight-year-old’s leg. Hunter was howling in pain, screaming, crying for his sister, crying for Dani to turn back and help.

They kept running.

They ran until the adrenaline wore off and they were hopelessly lost and it was close to sunset and the others had to be worried by now. Jim had dropped their haul for the day somewhere along the way, probably early on. When they returned to camp, it would be empty-handed and minus one child.

One less mouth to feed.

Jim cursed himself for even thinking that.

They slowed to a walk and started heading back, retracing their steps. It was quiet. Jim could hear his blood pounding in his ears. He wished more and more that they still had Dani’s spear.

“I tripped him,” she said suddenly. “I knew we weren’t gonna make it, and so I tripped him. Would’ve tripped you, but you were too far away.”

Jim looked at her.

“I don’t know why I did it. I didn’t even think about it. I just—I wanted to live, and so… And so I tripped him,” she said. “I killed my own little brother.”

He had nothing to say to that.

“Where’s Hunter?” Bobbi asked.

“And the food?” asked Kevin.

“Hunter’s dead,” Jim said, because Dani couldn’t. The whole camp stilled.

“What happened?” Tamara asked.

“Some bear-wolf thing attacked us,” he said. Dani looked at him fearfully, expectantly. He didn’t say anything more, and the group left it at that.

Tarsus IV didn’t have a hospital. There was only eight thousand people. They had a doctor’s office with a fully equipped operating room just in case. It was rarely ever used.

The doctor had a lot more patients lately.

Jim and Tamara broke into the office in the middle of the night and stole a spare dermal regenerator. They slipped out quietly, unseen and unheard.
“You sure you know how to use that thing?” Tom asked nervously.

“No,” Tamara said bluntly. “I am not a doctor.”

“I betcha I could figure it out,” Jim said. “I’m real good with technology.”

“You sure?” Tom asked. “This is serious business, JT.”

He shrugged. “I don’t know exactly what I’m doing, but no one else here knows any more than I do, so I think I’m your best shot.”

Tom laughed hysterically. “Well isn’t that just reassuring?” He shoved the dermal regenerator into Jim’s hands and took off the shirt-blindfold, his remaining eye closed.

Jim flicked the machine on and set to work.

The results were not pretty.

The bleeding had stopped, at least, and where there once had been a gaping hole there was now a mangled knot of skin. Dermal regenerators are meant to be used by trained professionals only. The entire side of Tom’s face was a mess of warped and rigid scars, bumpy and raised. The skin was too thick in some areas and too thin in others.

He looked like a monster come to life.

“Thank you,” he said.

Jim’s mouth quirked. “No problem.”
Angela

Angela got sick.

She developed a hacking, wheezing cough that made her throat scratchy and dry. She was running a high fever and couldn’t stop shivering. She kept puking.

Tamara held her hair back while she vomited into a bush. Suddenly, she frowned. “Angela, have you been eating bugs?”

“Yeah? I was hungry,” she said.

Tamara closed her eyes.

“It’s the same thing Gavin had,” Jim said. “Bugs eat the crops, crops are covered in fungus, you eat the bugs, and…”

“And what?” Angela asked. Tom glared at him.

“…And you get sick,” he finished.

She died in her sleep that night, while Tamara was holding her. She cried silently until dawn when the other kids woke.

They buried her in a much tinier, much deeper grave next to Gavin. Bobbi put dandelions on top. Tamara gave a eulogy, wiping tears the whole time, and Kevin was sniffling.

“Where did Angie go?” he asked.

“In the ground,” Jenny said.

“When does she come back? We were gonna play tag later. She promised.”

“She isn’t coming back, Kev,” Tamara said.

“Why not?” he whined.

“Because she’s dead!” Dani snapped. Everyone turned to look at her. “She’s dead just like Hunter and Gavin and she’s never coming back. She’s dead.”

Kevin started bawling, which set Baby off bawling, and then Bobbi was holding back sniffles too. Dani rolled her eyes and stormed off.

“Hey,” Jim said, taking a seat next to Dani, where she was leaning against a tree and angrily pulling up grass. “You okay?”

“No! Why the hell would I be okay?” she snapped. “Sorry. Sorry, I didn’t mean to—I’m just mad, I guess. None of this should be happening.”
“Yeah,” he agreed. “It sucks.”

She nodded.

For a while, they just sat there, and Jim pretended not to notice the tears rolling down her cheeks. Then her crying grew more fervent, her breathing becoming ragged, and he pulled the nine-year-old in for a hug, shushing and rubbing circles on her back.

It had been two months since Kodos shot up the school. Fifty-eight days, to be exact. Erin kept track, carving tally marks into a tree with her knife every morning. She was quickly becoming the camp’s very own weapons specialist. Half the traps they had out were her design.

Shravan’s poetry got darker. Her blue skin had a new pallor to it, and something about her eyes had changed too, but Jim couldn’t pinpoint what. Her antennae seemed more… droopy.

Jenny got even more aggressive and confrontational. Her friendship with Dani quickly dissolved into a bitter rivalry. Neither girl would speak to the other except to deliver cutting insults.

The overall mood of the camp was grim. Baby was constantly crying and they had no diapers for her. They were forced to improvise with fern fronds, and her diet of ground-up grass mush and the occasional bitter leaf was definitely not healthy or well-received.

Andoria was a frozen moon, covered in ice and snow. On Tarsus IV, the air felt like hot soup sometimes. Shravan was not doing well.

She cut her jeans into shorts and tied her shirt up around the midriff. She started wearing her long, thick white hair in two braids to keep it off her neck. She had a bit of a teenage alien cowgirl vibe going on, and it would be cool if it wasn’t a medical necessity and she wasn’t sweating buckets the entire time.

There were some days she couldn’t even get up. Things were better at night, when the temperatures dropped and she would sleep on the edge of camp, as far away from the fire as she could get and spread out on the cold ground and cool pine needles. She started staying awake at night more and sleeping during the day.

Tom made her drink a ton of water and was constantly checking her temperature with the back of his hand. He would make her sit in the shade and rest with him and Baby a lot. She wasn’t allowed to go check the traps or exert herself too much. She stayed close to the stream most days and sometimes just sat in it like it was an icy, shallow Jacuzzi.

Tom worried.

It was fine.

“We need to go on another raid,” Erin said, sharpening a newly-made spear.

Tamara shook her head. “Uh-uh. Too risky.”

“But necessary,” she said.
“Getting caught means getting killed. The situation at the colony has to be even worse by now. Everyone’ll be on high alert and paranoid. You step foot in that colony, you’re dead.”

“If we don’t go, we’re dead then too,” Jim said. “Grass and meat isn’t enough.”

“It’s working for now. Look, it’s not worth risking your lives to try and get some cans of green beans or whatever,” Tamara said.

“When will it be? We’re just gonna get weaker and weaker if we don’t do something,” Jim said. “For pete’s sake, just look at Bobbi! She looks like a skeleton with skin stretched over it.”

Tamara bit her lip. “Well I’m not going.”

“Fine. I’ll do it myself,” he said.

“No, you won’t,” Erin said. She strapped her knife back into her belt and hefted the spear to her other hand. “I’m coming with you.”

“Me too,” Dani said.

“Guys, this is a terrible idea,” Tom said. Baby cooed in his arms and he shushed her, bouncing her up and down gently.

“You got any better ones?” Jim asked.

They saw a man get into his hovercar and leave for the day. They crept over to the door and Jim set to work hacking, Dani and Erin covering him and keeping guard, homemade weapons pointing outward.

A click and a hiss as the door whooshed open.

They slunk inside and closed the door after them.

They began methodically raiding the kitchen, loading down their shirts with cans and boxes. Jim checked the stasis unit and found containers full of leftovers, leftovers from actual home-cooked meals.

“Jackpot!” he said. He began loading up.

A heavy-set man appeared at the doorway, glowering, and the kids froze.

The man thought fast and yanked out a butcher’s knife from the block sitting on the counter and the kids took off running, Erin dropping food as she fumbled for the door. Jim and Dani rushed out ahead of her, and the man lunged, catching her in the arm just as she slipped out. She cried out, and the man was screaming obscenities, chasing them, but the kids were small and quick and light on their feet and he gave up soon enough.

They dropped their winnings by the died-out fire and heaved, slowly catching their breath. Erin clutched at her upper arm in apparent pain, doing little to stop the bleeding.
“What happened?” Tamara asked.

“There was more than one person in the house,” she said dryly, still breathless. She winced and sank down to the ground. Jim got out the dermal regenerator from its designated spot against a nearby tree and went to sit next to her. She rolled up her sleeve, revealing a large, deep gash running across her upper arm, bleeding heavily and with fibers from her shirt stuck in it.

“Get me some water,” he said. Dani nodded, and ran off to get one of their water bottles from the backpacks. She brought it back along with a few leaves.

Only two of the kids had had water bottles in their bags on the day of the shooting, so they didn’t really use them for drinking that often. They mostly just went to the stream, and the water bottles were refilled there and used when it was the middle of the night or someone was too weak or sick to get up.

Jim ran water over the wound, then got a leaf wet and wiped the fibers out with it, Erin hissing in pain as he did so. He cleaned it as good as he could get under the circumstances, and then started up the dermal regenerator.

The cut had been extremely deep. The regenerator patched up the skin alright, but it left a large, angry pink scar in its place, raised and bumpy, the type that would fade to white in the sun after some time.

Erin rolled her sleeve back down and it was soaked to the cuff in blood. She went to the stream to wash it off before it could dry that way.
Jim dug little pits in the ground and put pebbles in them. He taught Kevin how to play mancala.

“What do you want to be when you grow up?” he asked.


“That’s cool. I wanna be a scientist.”

Kevin wrinkled his nose. “But then you have to do science.”

“I like science.”

“I don’t. I think school’s boring.”

“You’re a kindergartener. You’ve only been in school for like, half a year. You gotta give it a chance.”

He rolled his eyes. “Okay, Mom.”

Jim laughed and ruffled his hair.

“Hey! Give that back!” Shravan yelled across the camp. Jenny turned her head back to stick her tongue out, still running.

Tom set Baby down and stormed over to the two girls. “What’s going on here?”

“Jenny stole my food!”

“I did not!”

“Yes you did!” She shoved her.

“It’s not like it matters! You’re gonna die anyway!”

Shravan gasped and Tom glared, ready to cut in with a reprimand, when suddenly the Andorian launched herself at Jenny, the two of them quickly becoming a tangle of flying limbs as they fought over a half-eaten bag of chips.

Jenny decked Shravan straight across the face, breaking her nose with a loud crack and making blue blood spill out everywhere. Shravan kicked her legs out from underneath her, and Jenny went down, the bag flying out of her hand and spilling chips all over the grass. She was back up in an instant, grunting and throwing punches and kicks wherever she could.

The girls were pretty evenly matched, twelve and thirteen, only one year apart. But Jenny was an athlete and a fighter and Shravan was a quiet, peaceful kid at heart. Even though she was younger, it looked like Jenny was gonna win.

Tom, Jim, and Tamara were all screaming, trying to pull the girls off each other, to no avail. Jenny
yanked at one of Shravan’s braids, whipping her head forward straight into her fist. Shravan yelped and slammed her foot down on the girl’s toes, then shoved her hard.

Jenny stumbled back and tripped backwards over a rock. Her head made a sickening crack as it connected with a tree trunk. Her eyes fell closed, and she was completely still.

Nobody said a word. Shravan clapped a hand over her mouth, tears springing to her eyes.

Baby cried in the silence. It sounded deafening.

They dug a third grave.

“Here lies Jenny Tyler,” Tamara said. “She was a good kid. She had a big heart and she loved life. She was a soccer player, a baseball player, and tough as nails, through and through. She will be missed.”

Bobbi put more dandelions on top of the grave. So did Dani.

“You know what my last words to her were?” Dani asked Jim later, by the fire. Her voice was hoarse and strained, like she was trying really hard not to cry. “I called her a bitch.”

“You didn’t mean it,” Jim said automatically.

She shook her head. “I did. When I said it, I did. And then she stuck her middle finger up at me and walked away.” She sniffled. “We gave each other our comm numbers, on the first day. We wanted to keep in touch. After.”

Jim draped an arm over her shoulders and pulled her close, feeling numb.

She was only nine.

He was only thirteen.

Every single one of them was too young to be here.

Tom rocked Baby by the fire, softly singing her a lullaby, and all the other kids pretended they weren’t listening to it as if it was for them.

Things were okay. There were nine of them left, and things were okay. They ran out of the food they had stolen in the raid, and that was okay too. Baby got colic and wouldn’t stop crying, at all, ever, and that was annoying and meant none of them got any sleep but ultimately it was okay.

Then the real hunger set in.

Erin’s tally count reached 73 days. They were all malnourished. They were weak and lethargic and lots of them had scurvy now and were starting to lose teeth. They could all count their ribs. Their limbs looked like knobby bones that happened to be covered in skin. Their eyes were sunken and dull, deep dark shadows around them.

They were dying.
“We need to do another raid,” Jim said tiredly.

“Hell no,” Tom said.

“What else are we gonna do, then? Just die?” he snapped.

“Maybe!” Tom bit back. Jim rolled his eyes and scowled.

“It’s like Gavin said. This place isn’t a democracy. I’m doing another raid whether you guys agree to it or not.”

“I’m coming with you,” Dani said.

“No. No, you are not,” Tamara said. “You are nine and you are staying at the camp where it is safe. If JT wants to risk his neck, then that’s fine, but I’m not letting him risk yours too.”

Dani glared. “You aren’t the boss of me. If I wanna go with JT, then I’ll go with JT.”

Tom gave Jim a look that told him very clearly what was expected here. He sighed.

“Look, Dani… Maybe they’re right. Maybe you should stay behind,” he said.

“No! Why?!” She looked near tears.

“It’s too dangerous. Erin got hurt last time, and me and Tamara both nearly got shot on the first time. You could get killed if you get caught. You’re too young.”

“We’re all too young! You’re only thirteen! How come you get to go?”

“Because—Because it’s different with me.”

“How?! You aren’t even that much older than I am!”

“Dani, you’re like a little sister to me, and I want you to stay behind and be safe,” he said.

She glared. She rose up from her seat and stormed away.

Tamara rubbed Jim’s back consolingly. “You did the right thing.”

He wasn’t going to rob a house this time. He was going straight for the big guns. Kodos’ warehouse.

He lurked outside of it for an entire day, sixteen hours. There were two guards stationed outside the door. They changed every eight hours. For three minutes during the shift change, the warehouse was unguarded.

He could hack the security lock in under three minutes.

He waited until both guards went away and then ran the short distance to the door, fingers flying over the keys rapid-fire. He slipped in in two minutes and nineteen seconds.
Now he had to wait eight hours for the next shift-change in order to leave.

He decided to take two huge bags of grain that weighed almost as much as he did. The bags would be useful after they were emptied, too; they could use them to carry food away on future raids.

Eight hours passed in mind numbing boredom.

He had been away from the camp for over a full day now. This was officially the longest raid ever. Thankfully, it wouldn’t take this long in the future, now that he knew the schedule. He figured it would take a round eight hours and that’s it.

He watched the warehouse clock tick down.

This sucked.

Finally, the clock chimed the end of the final hour. Jim heaved a sigh of relief, hefted the two grain bags onto his shoulder, and headed for the door.

The guards weren’t quite around the corner yet when he opened it.

“Hey!” one of them shouted.

Jim dropped the bags and ran.

A large hand jerked him back by the collar of his shirt and spun him around. “So you’re the little brat who robbed the Carruthers a few weeks back.”

“Let’s bring him to Kodos,” the other said. “He’ll wanna execute him personally. And find out how he did it.”

“Please!” Jim cried. “Please don’t! I’ll do anything! Please just let me go!”

The guard looked him up and down hungrily, but it was a different type of hunger than Jim was used to. The guard looked back to his companion, who nodded and grinned lecherously.

“Get down on your knees.”

He returned to camp empty-handed and sniffling. He felt anxious and sad and dirty and violated and a thousand other things that he couldn’t put a name to. He was sure the other kids would be able to tell what had happened just by looking at him somehow. They would be disgusted. They would probably kick him out of the camp.

He was disgusting. And he hadn’t even gotten any food.

He was lucky, he supposed, that they kept their word and let him live. They could have just as easily killed him afterwards.

They probably figured he would get hungry enough to come back eventually and then they could do it again.
They had slapped him and pulled his hair and called him all sorts of names the entire time and he
could still feel them everywhere, in him, poisonous, worse than the fungus. He felt like he knew
what it was like to be infected like that, to be rotting from the inside out. He would if that was what
Gavin and Angela had felt like.

His face was burning and his heart was pounding and he walked back into the camp looking
sheepish and holding back tears.

“JT!” Kevin yelled. He ran up and hugged him. “Where’s the food?”

“Sorry, Kev. I didn’t get any.”

“What happened?” Tamara asked, concern clear on her face.

“I, uh, a guard saw me. So I ran.”

“Well, thank god you got away,” she said, and gave him a hug too. Jim buried his face in her
shoulder and held on tight. The older girl kissed the top of his head, almost motherly despite barely
being older than him. “That must have been so scary for you. No more raids, okay?” She ran her
fingers through his hair, soft, and it felt good on his aching scalp.

“No more raids.” He smiled weakly.

He cried himself to sleep that night, biting his lip to keep silent, his back turned to the others so
they wouldn’t see.
Bobbi

Tom sang a lot. It was near-constant. It became the accepted background noise of their camp. In name, it was to keep Baby quiet, but it kept the mood from dropping too low for the rest of them too.

His favorite song to sing was—oddly enough—the unofficial Tarsan colonial anthem. Beyond Antares, it was called. It was a running joke in the colony. Tarsus IV actually was beyond Antares, and in the song that was used as a metaphor for something being ridiculously far away.

They used to say—jokingly, of course—that Tarsus IV was so far away that it could implode on itself and the rest of the Federation wouldn’t even notice. The Tarsan star would have to go nova and then maybe the Council would send out a science vessel to observe it or something.

It just really wasn’t that important of a colony. And there were so, so many of them.

Tom’s voice drifted gently on the breeze.

“The skies are green and glowing
Where my heart is
Where the scented lunar flower’s growing
Somewhere beyond the stars
Beyond Antares

“I’ll be back, though it takes forever
Forever is just a day
Forever is just another journey
Tomorrow is a stop along the way
And let the years go fading

“Where my heart is
Where my heart is
Where my love eternal is waiting
Somewhere beyond the stars
Beyond Antares.”

Jim dreamt of green skies and white flowers and a stomach full of food.

Jim vowed that if he ever got off this planet, he was never going to eat another salad again in his life. That was what Tamara and Tom told them to imagine the grass was. Just pretend it’s a salad and then it’s not so bad.

It tasted fucking nothing like a salad.

Jim hated salad now.

His mouth hurt constantly from the scurvy and he would be willing to give up a minor appendage in exchange for a toothbrush. He had lost five teeth so far, one of them being one of two front teeth. It made him feel like a kindergartener.
His head was fuzzy all the time now. The pain came in waves. It was pain now, not hunger. Hunger seemed too small of a word. Jim felt like his stomach was trying to eat itself. If he remembered his biology correctly, then it probably was.

When your body goes into starvation mode, it takes away your muscle mass before going after your fat stores. Fat stores are like insurance, the last resort, saved for when all hope is lost. The result was the kids got weak fast without losing any noticeable amounts of weight at first.

At first.

Then they started burning through their fat stores.

Multiple organ failure wasn’t far away now.

They were catching less and less in their traps. They weren’t the only ones hunting, of course. The animal population was taking a nosedive. Soon there wouldn’t be any prey left.

The camp was a wide circle of bare dirt in a clearing now, all the grass long since crushed, trampled, or eaten. They were having to go farther and farther into the woods to get it. They started eating leaves off the trees to supplement it.

The leaves tasted disgusting and were hard to keep down and gave them bathroom troubles. They weren’t supposed to be eaten. They were a temporary solution at best.

Then the fungus spread to the trees and their temporary solution was gone.

They ate dandelions, which actually were edible.

There weren’t that many dandelions.

The kids kept food communally and rationed it out to each individual according to their need, the little kids getting more. The food was in a pile near where Tom usually sat.

It wasn’t that he was guarding it. They didn’t need to guard it.

Until Tamara caught Bobbi stealing from the pile while Tom slept.

She yanked her hand up and ripped the piece of charred meat away. “And just what do you think you’re doing?”

“I—I was hungry, and—“

“Bobbi, we have rules. This food is for everyone. You’ve already gotten your fair share for the day.”

“But it wasn’t enough!” she cried. “I’m so hungry! We have food, why can’t I eat it?”

“Because we all need to eat it! We’re all hungry, Bobbi. You don’t see Dani stealing food, do you? We all have to leave some for everyone else.”
Bobbi glared through her tears and lunged for the piece of meat, stuffing it in her mouth before Tamara could react and eating it ravenously. Tamara took a step back, shocked.

Bobbi dove on the pile of food and tore into it like a wolf, like a starving person. She ate a whole day’s worth of rations within three minutes. Tamara moved to pull her away, and the nine-year-old growled and scratched her, drawing blood in long streaks and making Tamara yelp.

Bobbi was still feasting, and now Tom was awake, trying to shoo her away. Jim leapt into the fray, trying to help Tamara pull her away, but Bobbi was savage, kicking and screaming and elbowing them wherever she could.

She lurched suddenly and ran away from the pile. She braced herself against a tree and puked up everything she had just eaten.

“Great,” Erin snarked.

Bobbi glared up at her, eyes feral.

“Bobbi, what the hell?” Jim asked. “That was days’ worth of food you just wasted! It wasn’t yours to waste!”

“You can’t get away with this,” Tamara said. “We’ve let this shit go on long enough. You need to be punished, and we need to have rules.”

“And what? You’re just in charge now?” Dani asked.

“No,” she said. “Maybe this place should be a democracy.”

They held a council. They voted to make rules.

The Rules of Camp Sucky (as Dani insisted on calling it):

1. No stealing food.
2. No murder/violence.
3. Break a rule and you’re banished from the camp.

That was all they could really think of.

“So what? I’m banished now?” Bobbi cried.

“No, it’s not an ex post facto law. The rule wasn’t in place when you stole the food, so you can’t be punished after the fact for breaking a law that didn’t exist then,” Jim said.

Dani looked up at him. “You’re a nerd.”

“Just don’t do it again,” Tamara said.

Bobbi did it again.

She lasted three whole days under the new rules.
They caught her raiding the food pile late at night when everyone else was asleep. She had only gotten caught because Baby cried and happened to wake Tom up right then.

She had probably been doing it every night.

The kids stood around her in a circle, unsympathetic, while she cried and pleaded.

“Please! I swear I won’t do it again! I’ll do anything! Don’t kick me out! I’ll die on my own!”

Jim suppressed a shudder.

“Shoulda thought of that before you decided to steal food from the rest of us,” Erin said.

Her chin trembled, and she caught every one of their eyes, looking for pity, for hope, for anything.

Tamara folded her arms. “You know the rules.”

Bobbi’s face crumbled. Fat tears rolled down her cheeks. She turned and fled, sobbing the whole way.

They found her body a week later. She had broken her ankle. That was the cause of death—a broken ankle. Infection set in in her blood, she hadn’t been able to walk to get food or water, she hadn’t been able to defend herself from predators.

Bobbi Wilkins died of a broken ankle at the age of nine.

They took her body back to camp and buried her.
Shravan

The dead:

Gavin Drewes—death by fungus
Hunter Eames—murdered by his sister
Angela Martin—death by fungus
Jenny Tyler—killed in a fight over a bag of chips
Bobbi Wilkins—died of a broken ankle

The survivors:

Jim Kirk
Thomas Leighton
Tamara Sinclair
Kevin Riley
Dani Eames
Shravan Okch’l’noktway
Erin Molson
Baby

There were eight kids left. Jim could keep eight kids alive.

Shravan was getting worse by the day. The heat was getting to her. The environment was simply unsuitable for an Andorian. It had been fine when she lived in the air-conditioned colony, but it wasn’t so fine anymore, at the height Tarsus IV’s summer.

Erin chopped her hair off for her with a knife, shearing it into a haphazard buzzcut. Long ropes of white hair fell to the ground. They used it as tinder.

Her antennae drooped more and more each day. She practically spent the entire day laying down in the shade or in the stream, sweating out gallons of water and dehydrating far faster than the others were.

Her skin dried to a paler shade of blue. It cracked and bled everywhere. She had the worst case of scurvy of all of them. If the heat didn’t kill her, an infection would.

Jim’s fourteenth birthday came and went and he felt no need to tell the others. He didn’t celebrate it.

109 days.

One day, the traps caught nothing.

It wasn’t a big deal. They had some food stockpiled up. They just didn’t acquire anything new that day, and it wasn’t a big deal.

They didn’t catch anything the next day either.
The next day they caught a single squirrel.

It became a pattern. The pattern started to dwindle. Pretty soon, they were lucky to catch something—anything—even once a week.

Once every two weeks.

Two months passed since the first day they didn’t catch anything. It was day 178.

Shravan didn’t make it to day 179.

“Are we gonna bury her?” Erin asked.

“What do you mean, ‘are we’? Of course we’re gonna bury her,” Jim said.

Tamara looked at Erin, seeming to catch something that Jim didn’t, and then she looked to Tom.

“Seems… like a waste,” Erin said.

“What do mean? A waste of time? What else are we gonna do with it?” Dani asked.

“No,” Tom said. “She means… a waste of meat.”

Blood rushed past Jim’s ears. He heard nothing, saw nothing, felt nothing. This was insane. This was insane.

“No,” he said. “No, we aren’t doing that to Shravan. She deserves a real burial like all the other kids got.”

“JT—”

“No!”

Kevin looked around in confusion. “I don’t get it. Do what to Shravan?”

“Eat her!” Jim shrieked. “They want to eat her!”

Kevin’s eyes widened almost comically, his jaw dropping open. “But she’s our friend. She read me poems for bedtime and always gave me hugs.”

“We’re not eating her,” Jim said.

Tamara and Tom looked at each other.

They butchered Shravan into steaks and cooked her body over the fire.

Jim’s mouth watered at how good it smelled and he hated himself.

Within a half an hour, he was the only one in the camp still stubbornly refusing to eat. Dani came
and sat next to him and offered him a steak cut from Shravan’s calves.

His stomach growled. Dani looked at him with big, wide eyes.

He took the steak.

Andorian tastes like chicken. If Jim had some seasoning, he wouldn’t have known the difference. It tasted divine. It was the best meal he’d had in months.

He forced himself not to puke it all back up.

Shravan’s meat lasted them one week and then they were right back where they started: starving.

The word starving was starting to lose all meaning to Jim. It didn’t seem strong enough. ‘Starving’ was what you said you were when you skipped breakfast that morning. This, this was a whole nuther level.

Famished. Ravenous. Wasting away. To be hungry.

None of them fit. None of them even made sense. Standard needed new words to describe what Jim was going through. None of the current ones were good enough.

Kevin was getting too thin. He would be the next to go if something didn’t change.

Jim smiled at him and played mancala and talked brightly about the future, always implying that they would have one. Kevin became his little best buddy, practically attached to his hip and having no small amount of hero worship.

He had big brown eyes and curled up next to Tom when he sang Baby lullabies.

He didn’t deserve to die.

Jim snuck out of camp that night and walked the three miles into the colony. His heart was in his throat. He felt sick to his stomach, but then, he always felt sick to his stomach.

He sorta wanted to die rather than do this.

He thought of Kevin, he thought of Dani, and he steeled himself.

He walked straight up to the guards at the warehouse. They immediately levelled their phasers at him. He kept walking.

“How are you? What are you doing here?” one of them barked.

Different shift. Different guards.

“I’m a kid,” he said. “Not supposed to be alive. But if you let me in the warehouse for five minutes, I’ll make it well worth your while.”
He came back in the early morning carrying two huge bags of grain on his shoulder like a trophy. A returning champion. He plastered a huge, victorious smile on his face. The kids clamored up to greet him, shouting praise and exclamations.

“How did you get this?” Tamara asked, eyes lit up with hunger and approval.

“Robbed Kodos’s warehouse,” he said cockily. The kids gasped and exclaimed.

They all sat around the fire, passing around handfuls of grain like it was popcorn, and Jim regaled them all with a tale of his great heroism. He told them all how he had lain in wait until just the right moment, how he had hacked the panel with lightning speed, how he had slipped out under the cover of darkness, undetected, like a super spy.

They laughed and told stories and jokes all around. Tamara kissed Tom, to Dani and Kevin’s very vocal protests of how gross that was. The kids wouldn’t stop thanking Jim. Or smiling.

For the first time in months, they were happy.

So Jim figured it was okay. He would be okay. It was just sex. It’s not like it mattered. Lots of people had sex with strangers whose names they didn’t know. It was just one of those things that adults did. Jim had just gotten there a little faster than most people, but whatever. He had always been a fast learner.

It was just sex. It didn’t matter. It was just sex.

It was just sex.

Jim kept telling himself that all night. He looked at Tom and Tamara, at the way Dani laughed, at the hero worship in Kevin’s eyes, and he reminded himself that things were okay. This was okay.

He had done it for a purpose. He had done it for these seven kids. He’ll be damned if he lets anything happen to them.

What happened to Shravan was never going to happen again. He’d do anything to ensure it.
I’m going to stop killing so many characters soon I promise

It became a thing. Once every month, Jim took the two empty grain bags to the warehouse and came back with them full to the brim. No one ever questioned it. Why would they? He was JT. He was just that good.

Tom and Tamara kissed a lot more often and took to sleeping next to each other. Some nights they would sneak off into the woods, and Jim pretended really hard not to notice. Thankfully, the other kids were always asleep.

They seemed to actually be in love. Something about that struck Jim the wrong way. Made him feel a slight edge of fear. He wasn’t sure why or who for, but all of his instincts were screaming that that was a terrible thing. That something bad would happen because of it.

After all, when did anything good ever happen on Tarsus IV?

“It’s day 365,” Erin said. “We should do something.”


“Well, yeah,” she said. “We survived a whole year.”

“We didn’t survive. Almost half the camp has died.”

“Yeah, but not the entire camp,” she said. “And that’s sort of a miracle, isn’t it?”

They couldn’t exactly do anything special to throw a party or anything. But Jim surprised them. He made an extra trip to the warehouse and spent a whole twenty-four hours there and he came back sore and drained but carrying a bounty of the most delicious foods.

They made hard, flat biscuit things. Dani almost cried with joy.

It was worth it, Jim told himself. He was doing what he had to do. He was keeping his kids safe and fed.

They’d all had birthdays by now. Jim was fourteen. Erin was twelve. Dani was ten and Kevin was six. Tamara was fifteen and Tom was sixteen.

They were thin and lean and too short for their age, especially the younger kids. Scrawny. Underfed. Not growing like they should.
But they were no longer in danger of dying, and that was all thanks to Jim. So it was worth it. He had to do it. He had no choice. The alternative was death for him and all his friends.

He had no choice.

Tamara’s stomach started getting rounder. Jim noticed. They all noticed. No one was talking about it. It became the elephant in the room.

Sometimes she and Tom would whisper furiously at each other when they thought no one was looking. Tom seemed drawn, worried. Way older than sixteen. Tamara took to biting her nails.

They started giving her bigger rations without ever discussing it or saying why. She accepted the change without comment.

Tom started trying to teach Baby to walk and use the restroom on her own. It was slow going. She could now happily babble and crawl around the camp. The kids had to keep a closer eye on her. They didn’t particularly mind. Baby was adorable, all blonde curls and big blue eyes and happy baby squeals.

“We should name her,” Erin said. “She might actually live. She’s what, one and a half now? We have a steady source of food. She might get to grow up. And we can’t keep calling her Baby forever.”

“Yeah, especially if—“ Dani looked to Tamara’s stomach and trailed off.

“Okay. Who votes that we give Baby a real name?” Tom asked. Every hand in the camp shot up.

They started throwing suggestions around and voting and vetoing them all. It was the most excitement the camp had seen in months, since the one-year party.

They settled on the name Lenore.

“Lenore what? Doesn’t she need a last name too?” Erin asked.

“Lenore Fungus. I still say we name her Fungus,” Kevin said.

“We’re not naming her Fungus,” Dani said.

“Why not?”

“Because that’s a stupid—“

“What about Lenore Tarsus?” Tamara asked. “She is the Tarsus baby.”

“Or Lenore Leighton,” Jim said. “Tom’s practically adopted her anyway.”

Tom blushed furiously and Jim held back a laugh. Dani didn’t.

“I like Lenore Leighton,” Tamara said. Tom’s eyes widened comically huge. He let out a breathy, excited laugh and pulled her close, placing a kiss on her cheek.
“Then Lenore Leighton it is.”

Erin made a mock retching sound, and the kids laughed, Tamara and Tom blushing and smiling.

418 days.

Jim approached the guards, already taking his shirt off and flashing them a seductive smile. He knew exactly what they liked by now. All the guards that worked the warehouse knew of that little arrangement. He suspected that they were all covering it up from Kodos, too.

A guard grabbed him by the wrist and slammed him against the warehouse wall, his other hand going down yank at Jim’s pants and spread his legs apart forcefully. He bit down on his neck hard, and Jim allowed himself to hiss in pain loudly, just what he wanted. He writhed underneath the guard, making a pretense of struggling.

The man was already half-hard in his pants.

A gasp sounded from the nearby bushes. Tamara walked out, jaw dropped, eyes horrified.

“This is how you’ve been getting food?!” she shrieked.

Both guards levelled phasers at her, the one making sure to still keep Jim pinned to the wall.

“You fucking rapists!” she raged. She flung herself at the guards, fists flying, doing her best to yank Jim away from them, and he was yelling, telling her it wasn’t like that, that he agreed to this, but she wasn’t listening or that just made her angrier and—

A guard shot her in the head with a phaser set to kill.

Jim walked back to the camp in a daze.

“Where’s Tamara?” Tom asked. Jim dropped the bags of food by the fire.

“Why did she follow me?” he asked quietly.

“Wanted to see how you did it. I, uh… It’s pretty dangerous to rely completely on just one person for all our food,” he said. “I know in the past, whenever someone offered to go with you, you always said no, but that’s just strategically a bad move. And Tamara knew that. So… she followed you. You aren’t mad, are you? And where is she, by the way?”

“Tamara’s dead,” he said numbly.

Tom froze. “What?”

“Tamara’s dead,” he repeated. “A guard saw her. She got shot in the head with a phaser.”

The camp went still. No one had died in eight whole months, not since Shravan. They had started to think the rest of them might all survive or something crazy like that. They had gotten complacent. They had started to think they were safe.
“What happened to the body?” Tom choked out.

Jim shook his head. “Guards took it. Burned it.”

They had a memorial service anyway. They put a marker in the ground and Erin made a flower chain to go around it. Like a wreath.

They made ones posthumously for Hunter and Shravan too.

Tom sang Beyond Antares and the kids stood around their little homemade graveyard. A few of them even found it in themselves to cry.
I realized I had just killed over half my characters, so here’s a fluff chapter to make up for it before the real shit starts going down.

Things went back to normal and Jim dimly registered how morbid that was, that death had become normal. The only thing that changed was Tom. He got more withdrawn. Quieter. He sang more, but it wasn’t like it used to be. Now it was like he was afraid what would happen if he stopped.

Jim heard him crying sometimes. The other kids must have too. No one mentioned it. What could they say? Sorry for your loss? That was—They weren’t adults making platitudes. This was real life. This was their reality.

For a while, they had forgotten it included death. Stupid of them. Stupid of Tom. Falling in love was the dumbest thing a person could do.

Jim cursed himself. It wasn’t Tom’s fault. It had been an accident. He had forgotten how dangerous things were. That had to be it. Towards the end, even Tom and Tamara had known the baby would only mean bad news. It had been doubtful that either of them would have made it through childbirth, or if they had, then not much longer after that. Even if by some miracle they had both lived, the last thing this camp was equipped to deal with was a newborn.

Jim watched as Tom held Lenore close and inhaled her hair. He had been even more affectionate with her, since. Like he was afraid he would lose her too.

Jim was running the camp now. Tom was in no position to do it, and he was the second-oldest. Everyone else had died.


Oldest to youngest, dead to living. Their little graveyard had almost two full rows in it.

Maybe it was a good thing Tamara had only gotten to her second trimester. If she had carried the baby to term… Jim didn’t think Tom could take walking past that tiny of a grave every time he had to go to the stream. He was having a hard enough time as is.

“Jim,” Dani said. “Truth or dare?”

“Dare,” he said automatically.

“Oh, come on, you always choose dare,” Erin said.

“Yeah,” Kevin agreed.
He shrugged. “Sorry, guys. I already chose it, and you know there are no take-backs. That’s the rule.”

Dani narrowed her eyes at him. “I dare you to choose truth for your next five turns in a row.”

Jim blanched.

“Ooh yeah! That’s a good one!” Kevin said.

Jim rolled his eyes pointedly. “Fine, whatever. I’m not chicken. I’ve got nothing to hide. Tom, your turn. Truth or dare?”

“Truth,” he said.

“What is the most illegal thing you have ever done?”

“JT, we’re fugitives.”

He waved his hand at that. “Doesn’t count. There were extenuating circumstances. Now give us a real answer.”

“Umm, well aside from all the shit we’ve done to survive here, which apparently does not count, uh… One time I littered?”

Erin coughed. “Nerd.”

“Whatever. Erin, your turn. Truth or dare?”

“Dare,” she said without hesitation.

“I dare you to climb that tree.”

“Oh, that’s a wuss dare. Give me something better.”

“Dare her to jump out of it,” Jim suggested.

“Yeah!”

“I’m not sure that’s such a great—”

“Too late, I’m jumping out of the tree.”

She took the knives out of her belt first, just in case, and set to climbing.

“Erin, don’t do this. You’re gonna break your neck,” Tom said.

“Yeah yeah, whatever, Dad,” she said. Dani snickered.

She stood on the lowest sturdy branch of the tree and took a deep breath. And then launched herself into space.
She cried out in pain. The children rushed to her side.

Erin’s leg was twisted at an unnatural angle. White, shiny, blood-slicked bone was protruding through her skin, having shredded muscles and arteries on its way out. Blood gushed from the wound in copious amounts. Several key, important vessels had been severed.

Erin was screaming.

“Quick, get the dermal regenerator,” Jim yelled. Dani nodded, and went to fetch it, all but shoving it into his hands. He set it on the ground and took the two halves of Erin’s leg, preparing to set it.

“You might wanna brace yourself,” he said. She nodded, and Tom produced a small stick for her to bite down on.

Jim set the break as closely as he could and she screamed.

The skin over top and the veins themselves were repaired with a dermal regenerator but what lay underneath was still a mess. Erin needed a bone knitter and about an hour in a bioregenerative field to repair the muscle damage. As it was, her leg was currently being held together by a stick, scraps of fabric, and artificially grown skin cells. It was not an ideal situation.

It got infected.

The skin around the break was red and inflamed and puffy, looking entirely unhealthy and very painful. It got worse every single day.

“We need to cut your leg off,” Jim said. “Before the infection gets to your blood.”

Erin stared at him for a long moment. She sucked in a breath and nodded. “Do it.”

She was brave for a twelve-year-old.

They burned Erin’s leg.

They couldn’t just leave it out to rot. It would attract predators—if there were even any left. And they couldn’t eat it either, because it was infected and filled with pus.

So they burned it.

It smelled putrid. The kids watched it shrivel and pop and fall apart with morbid fascination.

“We never finished our game,” Erin said. Jim looked at her questioningly. “Of truth or dare.”

“I reserve the right to veto any and all dares from now on,” Tom said sternly. And Tom’s stern glares were really something, with the one eye and the half-melted face.

“Yeah yeah. JT! Truth or dare? Wait, you have to choose truth, don’t you?”
“Oh, come on. You aren’t seriously going to hold me to that, are you?”

“Oh yes we are,” Erin said.

He rolled his eyes. “Fine. Hit me. What’s your question?”

“Have you… ever been kissed?” she asked. Dani giggled.

“No,” he said. “Kevin, my man. Truth or dare?”

“Dare!” he grinned widely.

Jim’s eyes danced around the camp. “I dare you to lick that rock. One from the fire.”

The fire was dead now, had been for hours. The rocks inside the pit would be cool and burned free of germs.

Kevin took one warily and stared at it. Closing his eyes, he licked it, real fast, to the other kids’ cries of how gross that was.

“JT, I choose you,” he said. “Uhhh… What’s your favorite color?”

He shrugged. “Uh, green?”

The color of healthy plants and thriving life.

*The skies are green and glowing.*

“Alright, Dani. Truth or dare?” he asked.

“Truth!” she said.

“Have you ever had a crush on someone?”

She blushed hard. “Maybe.”

Erin snorted. “That’s a yes.”

“Oh, whatever, Erin! JT, let’s do you again.”

“Why is everybody picking on me today?”

“Because you never tell us anything. Y’know, we’ve lived together for a year and four months now. You’d think you’d trust us,” Tom said.

“I do trust you,” Jim said. Erin rolled her eyes.

“Okay, I got one. What’s the most useless thing you know?” Dani said.

“This oughta be good,” Tom said, smiling slightly.

“Easy. Mitochondria are the power house of the cell.”
“Don’t you mean is?” Kevin asked.

“No. Mitochondria is the plural form. The singular is mitochondrion, M-I-T-O-C-H-O-N-D-R-I-O-N.”

“Woooow. And I say it again: JT, you are a nerd,” Erin said. “Were you in the spelling bee?”

“No. That was for seventh and eighth graders only. I never made it that far,” he said. “Okay, now Tom. Truth or dare?”

“Truth,” he said easily.

“Who do you think is the Beyonce of the camp?”

“Oh, you, JT, it’s definitely you.” He grinned. “And would you look at that, it’s your turn again. What’s the weirdest thing I should know about you?”

“I almost choked to death on that last tooth I lost to scurvy. Would’ve been a hell of a way to die,” he said. “Kev! What about you? Truth or dare, my little man?”

“Truth,” he said, wrinkling his nose, obviously displeased with his previous dare.

“What’s your favorite color?” Jim smiled.

“Orange!” he said. “JT! Your turn again!”

“It’s his last truth; make it a good one,” Erin said.

“Who’s your favorite person at the camp?”

“You, little buddy,” he said, slinging an arm around Kevin’s shoulders and pulling him close. The five-year-old beamed like he had just given him the stars.
Jim turned fifteen the day Erin broke her leg. It wasn’t worth mentioning.

They tried to saw a tree limb into a rudimentary prosthetic for her, but it hurt so much that it wasn’t worth it. So Erin made herself crutches instead. She took to helping Tom take care of Lenore. She built more and more traps that continued to catch absolutely nothing, but Jim still checked them every day with Dani.

“Do you think we’ll ever get out of here?” she asked one day.

“Course we will, Dani,” he said. “And then I’m gonna be a doctor and Kev’s gonna be president of the universe and you’re gonna be… What are you gonna be?”


“You know what the name Danica means?”

“No, what?” she asked, now interested.

“Morning star,” he said.

Her eyes widened. “Screw singing, I’m gonna be a spacewoman and have my own star named after me!”

It is day 495 when everything goes to shit.

The guards take Jim in the warehouse. They’ve been doing that lately. More paranoid about getting caught, he figures.

It’s when they come out, Jim laden down with two huge bags of food, that they see the angry mob. Headed up by Kodos himself.

Kodos looks furious.

But under that, Jim sees fear. The man is being held at phaserpoint by his own citizens.

_The revolution is successful._

“What the hell is going on here?”

“What, is that your kid? Have you been hiding that kid?”

“Oh, I see. The rest of us _starve_, while this privileged brat gets to eat like a king!”

The crowd’s accusations grow louder and angrier and suddenly they’re shoving their way into the warehouse, trampling Jim and the guards on their way in, some pausing to throw in a few extra kicks at him for good measure. A boot lands heavy on his chest and knocks the air out of him, clipping his chin on the upstep. He curls in on himself protectively as feet thunder past.
His bags of food are yanked away and fought over viciously, adults tearing into each other like savages. Someone gouges a woman’s eye out for a can of expired ravioli. The mob quickly turns on itself, everyone trying to steal each other’s loot, and the warehouse devolves into chaos. Barrels are upturned, boxes are shredded open, fists and blood are flying everywhere.

Several people dropped their torches. The stored grain goes up like tinder.

People are screaming. People are running.

Some stay in the warehouse to fight, to eat, and Jim knows they’re gonna die in there.

He grabs some nearby boxes and takes off.

People are fleeing the warehouse like rats off a sinking ship. The fight spreads outdoors, never ceasing, adults clawing and fighting and biting for the barest scraps of food. They’re chasing each other, wild dogs, rabid.

Some of them follow Jim, intent on stealing his food, or maybe they think he has a stash hidden somewhere—he doesn’t know. He doesn’t care.

He drops the boxes in his arms and that makes some of them stop but apparently the others are still mad, still out for blood over his special treatment while they were suffering and they keep up the chase.

He can’t lead them back to the camp. He can’t.

He veers off and goes in an unknown direction in the woods. Adults are still following him, a line of swaying torches and pounding feet.

Maybe they’ll eat him, he thinks grimly. They’re certainly hungry enough.

He hears shouting, higher-pitched, softer, and no. The kids. The kids saw the torches. Or heard the shouting. He went too close to the camp and they saw him and now they’re coming and fuck, they’re going to get themselves killed.

The kids are rushing after him, yelling, vengeful. Angry on his behalf.

“No! Turn back! Don’t follow me!” he calls.

“Fuck you, JT!” Erin yells. She’s holding a wailing Lenore, the only one not moving. Even Tom is stumbling half-blind through the woods.

They’re gonna break their necks tripping over a damn tree root.

The forest is on fire now too. The whole planet is on fire. The fields are burning like tinder, wheat going up like a box of matches, smoke filling the air so thick it was hard to breathe. Jim ran back to camp to find Erin hunched over on the ground, coughing her lungs out. He yanks her up by the armpits and half-drags her away from the flames.

They had prepared for this. If the camp was ever compromised, they were to meet up at the cave.
where they found the bear-wolf that killed Hunter. The creature itself was long since dead, leaving
the cave unoccupied and almost completely unnoticeable unless you knew where to look.

Tom was the last to show up, all but falling into the cave at almost noon the next day.

He let his eye adjust to the darkness and then looked around at all of them, frowning. “Where’s
Lenore?”

“We thought you had her,” Dani said.

“No. Last I saw, she was with Erin.”

Erin paled. “Oh my god,” she said. “Oh my god, I left her at the camp!”

Kevin’s jaw dropped. Tom froze. He looked like he had just been stabbed to the heart.

“Oh my god, I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean to, I swear! I would never—I—I started coughing, and I
fell down, and everything got so mixed up in my head, and—“

“It’s okay,” Jim said. “It was an accident. She might still be okay. I’ll go look for her right now.”

“I’ll come with you,” Tom said.

He bit his lip, just slightly. “Maybe it’s best if you didn’t.”

Tom looked at him in confusion. Then understanding dawned. Resignation. Heartbreak. He
nodded, and Jim pushed back the bush covering the entrance of the cave, heading out.

He didn’t find Lenore.

He didn’t find her body either. He kept expecting to. He kept expecting to find a horribly tiny set
of charred bones hidden under some dead tree or behind some rocks somewhere. He didn’t.

He searched everywhere. Everywhere.

Someone must have taken her, the way they intended to take him. Jim felt sick to his stomach.

She must have made a good meal for someone.

He dug a tiny, empty grave just to fill it back up with rocks and fresh dirt. He put a marker and a
flower wreath over it and practiced what he would tell Tom.

I found her. It was the smoke that got her, not the flames. I hear it’s like falling asleep. Peaceful.

I took care of the body. Figured you wouldn’t want to see. Maybe you should go visit the grave
though, get some closure.

Yeah. Yeah, that’d work.

There was truly nothing left to eat within fifty miles of the Tarsus IV colony. Everything had
already been eaten, burned, killed.

Erin redid her tallies on the cave wall. 512.

They were down to a diet of grass and water. They tried eating tree bark. They got tongue splinters and nausea for their trouble. Figures.

Jim decided that if he ever grew up, he wanted to live in a place with no grass. He fucking hated the sight of it now. He was always going to associate grass with starvation and Tarsus IV.

What was worse was there wasn’t even that much grass left. Every survivor of the colony was in the woods now, desperately trying to survive just like they were. The fire had been devastating though. It had decimated the forest, burning up trees and grass alike.

It was like the whole planet was dead.

Jim knew that logically, that wasn’t true. That there had to be places on the planet where the vegetation hadn’t all burned up and the wildlife hadn’t been hunted to extinction. That there had to be food somewhere, if they could just get far enough away from here to find it.

They started walking on day 514.
They started walking south, perpendicular to the sun’s direction no matter what time of day it was. It was an easy way to ensure they didn’t end up going in circles.

They sang made-up songs and Beyond Antares and childish pop songs from two years ago. They sang the entire way, when they weren’t talking or laughing or joking. It seemed vitally important.

They walked for what seemed like forever.

*Forever is just another journey. Tomorrow is a stop along the way.*

Tom was supporting Erin as she hobbled along on one leg and Jim was carrying Kevin on his back. The little kid had tuckered out far sooner than they had anticipated.

“Dani, you doing okay back there?” Jim called.

She pushed a dark lock of sweat-soaked hair out of her face. “Uh-huh. I’m fine.”

Dani and Tom honestly looked like they could be siblings: pale skin, dark, almost black hair, and chocolate brown eyes. Kevin didn’t look that different either; mousy brown hair and rich hazel eyes. Erin and Jim seemed almost brightly colorful in comparison: Jim blond and blue-eyed and Erin strawberry blonde, covered in freckles, and with pale celery-colored eyes.

Erin had three knives tucked into her belt and a spear strapped across her back that was almost as long as she was tall.

She was only twelve. *She was only twelve.*

Suddenly Dani cried out in pain.

The other kids whirled to find an arrow sticking out of the child’s shoulder. They quickly formed a circle around her, scanning their surroundings like lightning. Kevin whimpered and cowered against Jim’s back.

“There! In that tree!” Jim yelled. He shrugged Kevin off his shoulders and started running towards the offending adult, who dropped out of the tree gracefully and took off sprinting.

Jim chased her until she was out of sight and then reluctantly, he turned back.

“What was that all about?” Tom asked.

“Think she thought Dani would go down silently and we wouldn’t notice,” Jim said.

“Was—“ Dani swallowed. “Was she gonna eat me?”

“Let’s keep walking,” Erin said. “We don’t want to lose any more daylight than we already have. Dani, why don’t you come to the front of the group? You can be our leader.”

She nodded, and the kids walked single file now, Dani heading up the group, followed by Jim
carrying Kevin and then Tom supporting Erin. The kids had treated Dani’s wound while Jim chased the attacker. The arrow had been pulled out and Tom’s shirt was tied tightly around the wound to staunch the bleeding.

Tom started sing. “The skies are green and glowing…”

There was no stream nearby anymore.

Stupid of them. They should’ve just followed it instead. Jim should have thought of that. He had been the one to suggest going south; this was his fault.

It had seemed like a good idea at the time.

Kevin wouldn’t stop whining. Erin was getting increasingly sarcastic and short with him. Tom was still obviously in mourning, and the only one who wasn’t a mess right now was Dani, and she was nursing a fresh wound and starting to get increasingly feverish and weak.

Jim had never realized what a big deal infections were until he didn’t have access to a clean, safe environment with abundant free medical care. He hadn’t even realized how nice his life had been before. Sure, Frank beat him sometimes, but he had never before come this close to dying.

Kodos had probably killed Frank. The thought sent a trill of satisfaction through him. And then he felt guilty. He shouldn’t be glad that someone had been murdered, no matter how bad that person had been, right? That was one of those uncrossable lines, a hard and fast moral rule.

Wasn’t it?

They kept walking. They ate grass. They tried not to vomit. It was hard.

And then Jim wavered on his feet and nearly went down while holding Kevin.

“That’s it, we’re taking a break,” Tom said. “Sit your ass down, JT.”

“You should have told us if you were that exhausted,” Erin said.

Jim slumped down against a tree obediently and closed his eyes. “It’s not that bad. I’ll be fine in like, five minutes.”

He didn’t see Erin roll her eyes.

Dani went and sat by his side, draping his arm over herself and snuggling against his chest for a nap. Kevin joined them quickly, practically crawling into Jim’s lap.

Soon all five of them were asleep.

They walked for three more days before they saw their first squirrel.

Erin whipped a knife at it too fast to be seen and it splintered straight through the creature’s skull. Her eyes were dead-set and determined.
It is pretty hard to split a tiny squirrel between five starving kids, but they made do.

They kept walking for five more days before they set up a new camp and started laying out traps.

Blood wasn’t the most rehydrating substance to drink, but it was better than nothing and it was easy to come by. Jim just hoped they didn’t get any diseases or anything.

Then on one day he saw Tom wincing while eating a squirrel.

“Bite down on a bone or something?” he asked. They sometimes didn’t get all of them out.

“Nah, it’s nothing. Just a toothache.”

It wasn’t just a toothache. It wasn’t a simple cavity either, or just another tooth lost to scurvy. It was an abscess. On an upper tooth too, the worst place for it.

Tom’s jaw started to rot. He was feverish and sweating. The tooth infection had spread to his bloodstream easily. It would be a matter of days before it reached his brain.

“You can’t die of a toothache, right, JT? Tell me I didn’t survive all of this just to die of a fucking toothache.”

Jim gave him a plastic smile. “Don’t worry Tom, I’m not gonna let you die from a lack of dental care. This isn’t the 1600s anymore.”

“Wait, are you saying it’s actually possible?”

“It, uh… It used to be one of the leading causes of death back on Earth. But that was centuries ago. We have dentists now.”

Tom looked him straight in the eye. “No, JT. No we don’t.”

Tom’s organs were shutting down. His brain was literally rotting.

Your upper tooth roots are just a bare three inches from the brain. It doesn’t take an infection long to travel that far.

Erin held Tom’s head still and Jim yanked the infected tooth out with his hands but they were already far too late. They had caught it too late, and they had no antibiotics. Tom needed a hospital, not grubby kids pulling his teeth out with their bare hands in the middle of the woods.

They didn’t even have any water to rinse it out with. Just animal blood. Which they figured wasn’t a good idea.

Tom Leighton had survived 527 days of the Tarsus IV famine and now he was going to die of an abscessed tooth.

“What’s that?” Dani asked, pointing up at the sky. Jim looked and saw a twinkling speck of light, like a star in the daytime.
“Huh,” he said. “I don’t know.”

Shimmering light wrapped itself around all five of them and Jim felt his molecules dissolve as he was suddenly transported.
They materialized in a transporter room.

There were three adults in the room. The kids immediately grouped together and assumed defensive stances, Erin and Kevin holding onto each other in the center of their little attack circle.

A man took the phaser out of his belt and set it down on the control panel. He approached them slowly, hands up.

“My name is Captain Christopher Pike,” he said. “You’re on board the USS Enterprise. We’re here to rescue you.”

They were taken to sickbay. The five of them were placed in biobeds and hooked up to IV lines feeding them fluids and nutrients.

“Can we have some food?” Jim asked.

“I’m afraid your body couldn’t handle solid food at this point. I can get you some water, if you sip it slowly,” Dr. Boyce said.

“What?!?” Jim squawked. “You aren’t gonna give us any food?!”

The kids protested loudly, and Dr. Boyce was trying to shout to be heard over all of them, and it wasn’t working, and finally he threatened to sedate all of them if they didn’t shut up.

Five mouths snapped shut.

Jim waited until the lights were out and the doctors had all gone to bed before slipping out of his biobed.

“JT, what are you doing?” Dani whispered.

“Getting us some food,” he said. He walked over to the door panel, intent on hacking it, but it slid open automatically on his approach.

Well, that was easy.

He didn’t know where the mess hall was, and he couldn’t risk trying to find an empty officer’s quarters for a replicator, so he would just have to wander for a while. Thankfully, there weren’t that many people up and about. It was the dead of night on gamma shift, and everyone who wasn’t working was in bed.

Well, almost.

He did pass a few crewmen who gave him strange looks, but he just flashed them a cocky grin and kept walking as if he belonged. He had learned long ago that you can get away with almost anything if you just act like you’re allowed to.
He eventually found the mess and replicated a goddamn feast. Chocolate cake, pizza, biscuits and gravy, pancakes, ice cream, Cheetos, you name it. He ran back to sickbay with an overflowing bounty in his arms.

When he got there, Dr. Boyce was glaring at the other kids, demanding to know where he was. He spun around when he heard footsteps approaching.

He eyed all of the food in Jim’s arms and sighed.

Apparently when you get up out of a biobed, it is no longer able to read your vitals, and so it registers as flatlining and immediately alerts the nurses and doctors.

Boyce took all of Jim’s food away. They were given water. Clean, cool water, but still, just water.

And they had to sip it slowly.

Kevin didn’t, too hungry for anything, and spent the rest of the night puking it all back up into a wastebasket.

There were 4006 survivors total. Only nine had witnessed Kodos give the kill order. Only nine could actually say for sure what had happened to the other 4018. The five kids in the Enterprise’s sickbay, and four of Kodos’s guards.

Jim knew one of them.

They were kept separate.

Jim and his kids had been the only ones who had been on the kill list and made it out alive. Boyce told them they were lucky.


Lucky. Technically, eight out of thirteen had died. These five had defied the odds.

Tom received dental care. He wasn’t going to die. He was put on antibiotics to fight the infection. The doctor tried to repair the mess that was his face as best he could, but there wasn’t much he could do at this point.

He gave Tom a black half-mask to wear instead. He still got stared at, of course, but now the stares weren’t of revulsion and disgust. Just curiosity. Some pity from adults who put two and two together.

They couldn’t give him a new eye. Whatever Jim had done with the dermal regenerator had fucked up the socket too bad for it to be able to take.

They were all treated for scurvy and given dental implants to make up for their lost teeth. Dani’s shoulder wound was treated and cleaned, and she was started on antibiotics.

They fit Erin for a prosthetic. It was difficult because the end of her leg wasn’t exactly the smoothest and the surgery performed hadn’t exactly been done under ideal conditions, so it didn’t
wield the greatest results.

Jim wouldn’t stop apologizing. He had permanently maimed his friends in his efforts to help. They kept saying it was fine, but Jim knew that it wasn’t.

He snuck out again the next night.

He programmed the biobed to continue a feed of the last hour’s readings on repeat. The kids very carefully did not cheer or get excited so that their heart rate spikes wouldn’t show on the monitors.

He returned with a feast of heavy, filling, rich food and passed it out to all his friends. They all gushed immense gratitude.

“Eat slowly,” he reminded them. “Don’t wanna puke.”

Their stomachs had all shrunk considerably due to internal atrophy back on Tarsus, so they ended up eating a lot less food than Jim had expected and hiding the rest under their beds.

Kevin was the first to start puking. Then Tom. Erin’s food was tossed back up over the side of her bed; she was still too unused to her prosthetic to make it to the bathroom in time.

Dr. Boyce came. He searched the sickbay and took all their food away. He tried to lecture them. Jim called him Kodos. All the other kids chimed in agreement. He ended up leaving in a huff.

He took away their food and Jim had a panic attack an hour later.

They were given thin broth, and a small portion at that. Jim let it sit, only sipping from it occasionally, as if to reassure himself that it was there.

They arrived at Earth and were whisked away to a real hospital.

Starfleet swooped in and made the list of survivors classified and had them all sign confidentiality agreements. They issued an official statement.

*The colony of Tarsus IV fell victim to crop blight and criminal mismanagement and abuse of power by its Governor Kodos, resulting in widespread death.*

That was it. That was all they said. Standard procedure was that the details of any massacre stay classified for ten years to give the survivors privacy and time to recover on their own.

They put all the kids in separate, solitary hospital rooms. Jim snuck out of his every night to check on everyone and relay messages back and forth. He gave everyone some small piece of storable food to hide and keep with them, just in case.

Tom gave him a strange look when he did it.

They were all given psych evals. It did not go well.
Kevin talked openly and easily about things that were supposed to be traumatic and horrifying. He told the doctors more than any of the other kids combined. He told them about Shravan.

The doctor had to excuse himself and go out in the hallway for five minutes to calm down.

They took Erin’s weapons away, and she went berserk. She stabbed an orderly, and it took three nurses to restrain her. And they did restrain her. She was handcuffed to the hospital bed and diagnosed with PTSD.

They talked to Tom. Asked him if he felt responsible, since he was the oldest. He told them about Tamara, and the baby they’d almost had. He told them about Lenore and how she had died in the fire.

Survivor’s guilt and clinical depression.

Jim refused to talk. He would only talk to the kids, and only if he was unsupervised. He didn’t give them anything.

Dani followed his lead just as stubbornly, much to the doctors’ chagrin. But they were able to trick her into talking. They rewarded her with small portions of food for every detail she disclosed.

Jim felt sick to his stomach. He always felt sick to his stomach.

Family members came to visit.

Erin was going to live with her cousins, of which there were many. Dani was being taken in by her now-dead mother’s fiancé. Tom was applying for status as an emancipated minor rather than go live with his grandparents.

Kevin’s whole family had been killed. He was going into foster care. He had no living relatives willing to take him in.

Jim begged his mother to adopt him.

“Jim,” she said tiredly. “I’m off-planet more often than not. I can barely take care of you, especially now that Frank’s gone. There’s no way I can take in a six-year-old.”

“You won’t have to take care of him, I’ll do that! Please don’t put him in the system, Mom.”

“I’m sorry, Jim. I can’t.”

Starfleet officials came and took statements from all of them. Jim still refused to talk. He wouldn’t even tell his mother what had happened. Hell, not even the other kids knew everything.

And if he had his way, no one ever would.
It was three months before they were discharged to go home. The kids ended up scattered across the Federation, half of them off to different Terran colonies. Only Jim and Kevin stayed on Earth, Jim going back to Iowa and Kevin heading to a San Francisco orphanage.

The first thing he did when he got home was order a large stuffed crust pizza and gorge himself.

He was medically cleared for solid food and he all but dared his mother to try and stop him.

He spent the entire evening hunched over the toilet, puking it all back up and hating himself for the waste. It had been enough food to feed the entire camp—all they needed for the day—back on Tarsus. And now it was sitting, wasted, in a toilet bowl.

He was disgusting.

He was disgusting.

He had eaten so much more than his fair share and all of it had gone to waste. He remembered Bobbi’s rabid binge-fest, where she ate enough to make the whole camp go hungry for the rest of the week, only to puke it all back up.

He knew why gluttony was one of the seven deadly sins.

He went back to school.

The whole damn town knew he had been on Tarsus IV. They didn’t need to know the details to all but drown him in pity. He felt like he was suffocating.

When he didn’t do his homework on time or at all, the teachers would just give him sad looks and say that’s okay, he can have an extension. He got snappish. Started talking back. Even moreso than he had before Tarsus. He had never exactly been one of the best-behaved students in the school, but now he was one of the worst.

He drank. He partied. He read on his padd all night, every night and tested out of sophomore year. He took the most advanced classes he was allowed to and got straight A’s on the tests and in-class work but completely bombed all of his homework. He just didn’t do it. He couldn’t. He couldn’t focus when he was at home, at least not on something as menial and un-challenging as homework.

It was the way that Winona looked at him, he thought.

He spent as little time at home as possible. It was easy to wash away his sorrows in alcohol and aircar races and upperclassmen girls. He liked the challenge, and they liked the troubled-genius-daredevil thing.

He seemed to have a knack for knowing exactly what someone wanted out of him. He knew when to play up the young and innocent act. He knew when to be the all-too experienced whore. He knew when someone wanted him submissive and compliant and when someone wanted him to
He gained forty pounds and shot up like a weed and looked like real teenager rather than an undernourished kid now, but he was still technically a hair underweight. He didn’t plan on changing that. He didn’t feel like him if he couldn’t see his ribs. That was what made it real. He needed some permanent reminder on his body that it had been real, it had happened, he had survived.

He lived off the unhealthiest junk food he could get his hands on and his diet was a huge point of contention between him and Winona. He tried explaining it to her one day and she started screaming at him to get a tattoo then, just follow his eating plan and get a fucking tattoo.

He slammed the door behind him and didn’t come back for two and a half days. When he did, he had a brand new tat on his left ribs—two stalks of wheat overlapping and the letters ‘IV’ emblazoned over them.

Winona pursed her lips and didn’t say anything.

Johnny was a class-A asshole. He was a senior, had been held back a year, and was the oldest kid in the school and very bitter about it. He did not enjoy taking the same classes as some cocky fifteen-year-old.

Not that they had many classes together. Just some basic ones that were mandatory for graduation, ones that Johnny was being forced to retake and Jim wasn’t allowed to test out of.

In exchange for not regularly getting his ass kicked, Jim allowed Johnny to copy off all of his work for Government & Econ. Jim was subtle, at first. He started it out slowly. It was one more question wrong on every assignment.

He began to fail the class.

He got called down to the guidance counselor’s office.

“Sup, Ms. G,” he said, kicking his feet up to rest on her desk. She gave him a stern glare. He smiled cockily and refused to move.

She physically pushed his legs off her desk. “Mrs. Beiderstedt says you’re failing her course. Three weeks ago, you had straight A’s. What’s happening, Jim? Is something going on at home?”

He shrugged. “Nah.”

“Do you need to get a tutor?”

“Please. That course is so easy, a kindergartener could pass it.”

“If it’s so easy, then why are you failing?”

“Oh, it’s intentional. I’m failing on purpose.”

“Why, Jim?”
He grinned. “To fuck with you.”

Johnny beat the shit out of him.

He had stolen a dermal regenerator from a hospital long ago, and was able to repair most of the damage on his own. Bruises, however, were the result of burst capillaries—minor internal bleeding under the skin—and even though the actual damage had been repaired, the visual effects would remain behind for a few days.

Winona gasped and dropped a pot of boiling noodles when she saw him.

“Jim!” she cried, rushing towards him and cradling his head in her hands. “Jimmy, sweetie, what happened?”

“Nothing, Mom, I’m fine.”

“No, you aren’t, sweetie. Who did this to you?”

“I, uh, I never actually got his name.” He bit his lip and looked down at the ground. Then glared, changed his mind, and met Winona’s gaze head on.

“…Were you jumped?” she asked.

That was a lot better than the ‘rough sex’ explanation he had planned on using. “Yes,” he said instantly.

She looked at him doubtfully.

Jim flunked over half his courses that year. He had detentions and Saturday schools almost as often as was physically possible. He got called down to guidance more than any other student. The guidance counselor got permission to speak with his therapist, and they emailed each other and his mom back and forth constantly, a little triad of concern.

Faux concern, in Jim’s eyes, mixed with a hearty helping of disapproval. He didn’t care. He didn’t give a shit. It didn’t matter if he graduated or not. He was already destined to have a shit future. That had been decided long ago, when he was thirteen years old and the colonial guard walked in and shot up his school.

“Jim,” his therapist said. Alicia. Her name was Alicia. “Were you ever—Sorry to be blunt, but were you ever sexually abused?”

“No,” he said. Then he leered. “But you can ‘sexually abuse’ me any time you want.”

She frowned.

“Jimmy, we need to talk,” Winona said. She gestured for him to sit down at the kitchen table. He did, wound tense as a bowstring.

“It’s been seven months since you got back from Tarsus,” she started. “I’m almost out of leave.”
For a moment, they were silent, as she allowed that statement to sink in.

“I turn sixteen in like, a month and a half,” he said. “I can apply for status as an emancipated minor then.”

“Do you want to?” she asked. “Because I can retire. If you need me to.”

“I don’t need you to,” he said.

“Are you sure, Jimmy? Because—“

“Mom, I’ve been on my own since I was thirteen. Getting emancipated would just be a formality. I know you love the stars. You don’t have to... put your whole life on hold just because I went a little hungry for a while. I’ll be fine.”

“Jimmy, it wouldn’t be a burden. You’re—you’re more important than my career. I love you.”

He smiled. “I know. I’ll be fine, Mom. I can handle it.”

She looked at him for a long moment, and then nodded, obviously relieved.
On January 4th, Winona took Jim to the courthouse and they petitioned for emancipation.

It was granted and finalized within a week. Winona resumed her interrupted mission with Starfleet.

The first thing Jim did was catch a ride to San Francisco and show up at every orphanage there until he found the one Kevin Riley was in.

He tried to adopt him. He was told no.

He tried to take him in as a foster child. He was told no.

The adults didn’t even take him seriously.

“I’m sorry, Kev. I tried, I really tried,” he said.

Kevin wrapped his tiny arms around him. “I know, JT.”

He kicked around San Fran for three days, sleeping in parks or on benches, before he figured he should head back to Riverside.

He dropped out of school. He had been failing anyway. It didn’t fucking matter. It’s not like he had a real future anyway.

He stopped seeing his therapist. She called him every day for two weeks before giving up. He never answered.

He worked odd jobs that never really panned out or lasted too long and then he realized there were other ways to make money.

People started betting on him in the aircar races. It was illegal as fuck but it was good money and it was fun as hell.

He had a lot of sex. He sometimes got paid for it. He didn’t see what the big deal was or why that was illegal in the first place.

He got arrested three times and left off with a slap on the wrist each time before the judge said enough was enough and sent him to juvie.

He spent six months in juvie for child prostitution. He tried to argue that it shouldn’t count as child prostitution since he wasn’t legally considered a minor anymore. It did not work.

Tom came to visit him one day.

“How the hell did you find me?” he asked.

“It wasn’t easy,” Tom said. “You never told us your last name. Or even your full first name. It was
always just JT. But then Kevin told me that you stopped by and tried to adopt him, and I looked up the records and found a sixteen-year-old James T. Kirk listed on the visitors’ log.”

He waited for a response and Jim didn’t give him any. He had nothing to say.

“You coulda kept in touch, you know,” Tom said. “The other kids miss you. They keep asking if I’ve heard anything.”

A spike of panic hit his chest. “Don’t tell them about… the charges. Can you just… not tell them I’m in juvie at all?”

Tom nodded. “Of course. Anything.”

“So what’s new? What’s going on with the kids?”

“Dani has amnesia. Sorta. She has really big memory gaps when it comes to Tarsus, and they’re getting worse as time goes by. Her stepdad’s trying to limit her contact with the rest of us. Thinks it’s bad for her.”

“Asshole,” Jim said. Tom nodded.

“She’s been taking dance lessons. She’s really good, apparently. She’s doing well.”

“And Erin?”

“Still traumatized as shit. Her aunt and uncle caught her sleeping with a knife under her pillow. They took it away. She’s been getting in a lot of fights. Acting out, you know?”

“I’ll talk to her.”

Tom raised an eyebrow dubiously, but didn’t comment. “Kevin’s gone through two foster families already, and I don’t think the current one’s gonna keep him either. He keeps freaking the parents out. They all say he’s too much work. He’s a special case, you know, he requires special attention.”

“I tried to adopt him.”

“I know.”

“What about you? How are things going for you?”

“Okay. I’m in this advanced program at school where you can take college courses while still in high school. I’m thinking about going into agricultural bioengineering.”

Jim laughed. “Damn, you actually have your life together.”

He smiled wryly. “You’ll get there too, JT.”

Before he knew it, it was September 17th, the three year anniversary of the school shooting that had started all of this for Jim.

He drank.
It was a rager that some kid from his old high school was throwing and he was crashing. He drank himself straight into oblivion and beyond.

He woke up in a hospital bed being treated for alcohol poisoning and being given a rape kit. He felt numb, so incredibly numb.

Except for the splitting pain that was trying to rip his skull in half. And he thought he’d had bad hangovers before.

He laughed bitterly at that and a nurse gave him a strange look.

He was in and out of juvie a lot after that. If he was perfectly honest, his life was going its greatest while he was there. Things were stable. Things were reliable. There was a steady, predictable routine and nothing ever deviated.

Sometimes he got in fights. Sometimes he got sent to solitary. It was okay. It was all okay.

He was eighteen suddenly and he was drinking and fighting and fucking his way through life and hoping one day, one of those things would kill him.

It didn’t.

That wasn’t okay.

But damn if he didn’t give the Grim Reaper an open invitation. He all but drew a bullseye on his forehead. He wasn’t just flirting with death, he was taking death out on the best date of its life and trying his hardest to get lucky.

“Come on, baby, kiss me,” Raina pouted.

“Sorry, honey, I don’t kiss,” Jim said.

“So what, you’ll fuck me but you won’t kiss me?” she asked, angry now.

“Yep,” he said. He downed his glass in a single swallow.

She huffed and turned away, furious.

Winona’s three-year mission ended. She came back to the farmhouse.

She looked around in dismay. The place was trashed. Bills and junk mail were piled up in a huge stack. Empty and half-full bottles were littered everywhere. The place didn’t look like it had been fully cleaned since she had left.

Jim was passed out on the couch, half-wrapped in a blanket, an empty pizza box and a pool of vomit on the floor next to him.

“Jim!” her voice cut like shards of sharp glass. He jolted and nearly fell off the couch.
“I’m up, I’m up.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing? Everything’s fine, Mom.”

“No! No, everything is not fine! You can’t live like this, Jim!”

He rolled his eyes. She scoffed, indignant.

“Jim, you either shape the fuck up or you get out of this house,” she said.

He looked her dead in the eyes, his gaze hard as stone and just as unyielding. He stood up, wavered on his feet a bit, and walked out.

He never looked back.
Tom’s Wedding

Homeless shelters didn’t always have a bed open, and they were a great place to get robbed, catch lice, and get eaten alive by bedbugs anyway. So Jim came up with a different solution.

One night stands.

Only that seriously cut into his working hours and his profits, and it soon became unsustainable. So he took to sleeping on park benches, on fire escapes, in back alleys away from everything.

He got mugged. So. Often.

And that was a really bad thing, because his good lucks was how he made 90% of his credits, and getting all beaten up and bruised really put a damper on that. There was only so much that he could make up for in the aircar races, especially since he didn’t have his own suped up aircar.

And that worked for a few years and he didn’t drink himself to death, surprisingly. He got arrested. He got STDs. He kept in touch with Tom.

“JT,” he said, smiling over the vidscreen. “You’ll never believe this. I have huge news.”

He looked at him warily. “And it’s good news?”

“Oh yeah, it’s great,” he said. “I’m getting married, JT.”

For a second, he was back on Tarsus, watching Tom and Tamara whispering at each other, tension and nerves clear on their faces, Tamara resting one hand on her rounded stomach.

He had always thought…

“That’s great,” he said, forcing himself to smile. “So who is this lucky person?”

“Her name’s Martha, and she’s, um, sort of my boss. You’ll love her, JT. She’s amazing.”

He sounded lovestruck. A knot of dread formed in Jim’s stomach. Nothing good ever came out of love. Hadn’t Tom learned that?

“I have something important to ask you,” Tom said.

“More news?”

“No,” he shook his head. “JT… Will you be my best man?”

His breath caught in his throat and he felt like he was suffocating, every thought in his head screaming danger danger danger. “Of course,” he choked out.

He was twenty-two and he realized that seven years had passed since he left Tarsus but somehow it didn’t register that all the other kids would be seven years older too, and he would be seeing them again at Tom’s wedding, like it some fucked up trauma reunion.
It also didn’t occur to him that most of the other kids were no longer kids.

He was floored to see a twenty-year-old Erin wearing an updo and an evening gown, moving confidently through the reception hall on her prosthetic. She didn’t hide the deep slash of a scar on her upper arm and didn’t seem to care about the stares that it garnered.

Dani was eighteen. *Eighteen*. She actually went by Danica now, and she was wearing a dress that was entirely too low-cut. Jim immediately offered her his jacket. She gave him a dry look and said no thanks.

Tom was, of course, twenty-four and getting married to someone who wasn’t Tamara.

Kevin was fourteen now, bored, covered in acne and constantly tugging at the collar of his tux in annoyance. His eyes lit up when he saw Jim. And then he quickly suppressed the reaction and went back to being a cool and disinterested teenager.

Dani—*Danica*—had come out of politeness or obligation, but she didn’t sit with them at the reception. She had almost no memories of Tarsus IV and was perfectly content to keep it that way.

Jim couldn’t blame her. Hell, he wished he was in that position.

“It’s so nice to finally meet you, JT. I’ve heard so much about you,” Martha said.

“Oh. Wow. That’s ominous,” he said, forcing out a laugh.

“Oh, don’t worry. Tom does nothing but sing your praises. He says if it wasn’t for you, he never would have made it out of Tarsus alive.”

Oh, and now they were going to talk about it. That’s just great.

“It was nothing,” he said.

Erin rolled her eyes. “It was not. Man’s a goddamn genius and he saved all our lives. We were the only survivors who were on the kill list, and that’s all because of JT.”

“You make it sound so noble. I was just doing what I had to do. I—Shit, guys, we stole from starving people. It’s not something I’m proud of.”

The table went silent at that.

“Sorry,” he muttered. “So what’s new with all of you these days? What are you all up to?”

“Well, I just got married,” Tom grinned. Martha swatted at his arm lightly, a matching grin on her face.

“I’m studying at the Rigellian Institute of Technology, majoring in weapons specialization,” Erin said.

They murmured their congratulations.

“Thanks. Two more years and I’ll have my degree. I wanna go for a doctorate afterwards, at the
Vulcan Science Academy if I can.”

“It’s tough to get in there,” Jim said.

She scoffed. “I can handle it.”

Jim laughed and bumped her shoulder affectionately.

“What about you, Kev?” Tom asked.

The teen blushed bright red. “I, uh… I ran away from my last foster home. The police found me though, and took me back.”

“You can come stay with me any time,” Jim said automatically, briefly forgetting that he himself had no place to stay. “I can try to adopt you again, if you want. I’m older now, they’ll probably let me.”

“No, I’m fine,” Kevin said. “They… The social worker assigned me to a new family.”

“They treating you right? ‘Cause I can beat ‘em up if not,” Erin said.

He smiled, slightly, shyly. “No, I’m fine. They’re nice people. And I’m starting to make friends at my new school too, so.”

“Well, still. You ever need anything, you comm me,” Jim said.

“That’ll be a change,” Erin said. “You gonna give us your number?”

“Yeah. Sure. Why not?” he said. He scribbled it down on a nearby napkin and pushed it across the table. Tom and Erin quickly inputted it into their comms, and after a moment’s hesitation, Kevin did too.

“You still kicking around in Iowa?” Tom asked.

“Yeah. Place I’ve got’s in a real small town, you wouldn’t have heard of it,” he said. “What about you? Still on the Benecia colony?”

“No, Tom and I are planning on moving to Planet Q after the honeymoon,” Martha said, taking her husband’s hand and looking at him fondly. He returned the look with an almost suffocating amount of affection.

Jim waited for Erin to make the appropriate gagging noise, but she didn’t. She just smiled slightly at the happy couple. Jim frowned.

He was working a bar, chatting up a pretty young cadet who looked like she had credits to burn on a night of fun or would at least have a nice hotel room they could go back to, which would mean a safe place to sleep and room service in the morning, if he was lucky.

A bunch of Starfleet cadets were in town on a fucking field trip to the George Kirk Memorial Shipyard to see the Enterprise being built. Jim was having a very, very good week.
And just as he was starting to figure out what the cadet liked, what she wanted him to be, a group of four oversized male cadets came over and took issue with that.

He called one cupcake and was rewarded with one hell of a right hook to the jaw.

Just as he was accepting that he was going to the hospital with a concussion for sure this time, a professor strode in and gave a shrill whistle, ordering every cadet in the building to go outside.

He gave him napkins for the bloody nose and sat him down.

“My name is Christopher Pike,” he said. “’Y’know, when the bartender told me who you were, I couldn’t believe it.”

“Yeah? Who am I, Captain Pike?”

“Your father’s son.”

He suppressed the urge to roll his eyes. He’d heard this speech a thousand times. Everyone thought he was a stain on the great Kirk legacy. Everyone thought he was a disappointment. Everyone thought he should be better than this. Everyone was disgusted by what he had turned out to be.

A disgrace.

“For my dissertation, I was assigned the USS Kelvin. Something I admired about your dad, he didn’t believe in no-win scenarios.”

“Sure learned his lesson,” Jim muttered.

“Well, it depends on how you define winning. You’re here, aren’t you?”

Yes, because his life was such a prize.

Pike continued. “You know, that instinct to leap without looking, that was his nature too, and in my opinion, it’s something Starfleet’s lost.”

“Why are you talking to me, man?”

“’Cause I looked up your file while you were drooling on the floor. Your aptitude tests are off the charts, so what is it? You like being the only genius-level repeat offender in the Midwest?”

Ha. As if it was that easy. As if being smart alone could get you shit in this world. As if it mattered that he was a genius when he was also an unemployable high school dropout with a record.

“Maybe I love it,” he said.

“Look, so your dad dies. You can settle for a less than ordinary life. Or do you feel like you were meant for something better? Something special?” he asked. “Enlist in Starfleet.”

“Enli—” the word died on his lips with a laugh. “You guys must be way down on your recruiting quota for the month.”

“If you’re half the man your father was, Jim, Starfleet could use you.”
Like so many others before.

Sounded so fucking appealing.

“You could be an officer in four years. You could have your own ship in eight. You understand what the Federation is, don’t you? It’s important. It’s a peacekeeping and humanitarian armada.”

“We done?” he asked. This was seriously cutting into his working hours.

“I’m done. Riverside shipyard. The shuttle for new recruits leaves tomorrow at 0800,” he said. “You know, your father was captain of a starship for twelve minutes. He saved eight hundred lives, including your mother’s. And yours. I dare you to do better.”
He settles into the Academy and lands himself a scruffy doctor he decides to call Bones as a roommate.

He decides he’s going to keep Bones. He’s nice and just as afraid of love as Jim is. They’re so close they’re practically soulmates and Jim thinks oddly that they probably would have fallen in love if they were any other two people. As it is, they’re a lot closer than is normal for a human male friendship.

Not that Jim trusts him or anything. He’s not stupid.

“Jim?” Bones calls. “Why is there a granola bar in the bathroom cabinet?”

“Um, because I put it there?”

“I’m probably gonna regret asking this, but why in the sam hill would you do something like that?”

“For emergencies?” Jim said. Duh? “When we run out of food, you’re gonna be grateful that that’s there.”

“When we run out of food?” Bones’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. “What are you planning?”

“Nothing,” he said.

Gaila is assistant professor for Advanced Computer Coding. Jim is assistant professor for Advanced Hand-to-Hand Combat. They fuck and give each other tips on their respective classes. They start meeting up for lunch once a week, and then twice a week, and then they sit together in the cafeteria every single day.

She used to be a sex worker too. She started at age fourteen. Jim’s age sixteen seemed tame in comparison. They didn’t tell anyone else.

Not even Bones knew. Jim had propositioned him a few times, when the man was stressed out from tests or drama with Jocelyn. Bones was nice to him, the least he could do was help him relax a little.

But for some reason Bones always turned him down with a roll of his eyes and then later, increasingly questioning and pitying looks. It was enough to make Jim stop.

Sleeping with Bones was never gonna happen. Shamelessly flirting with Bones and making him horribly uncomfortable, however…

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Jim is sitting in the now-empty classroom across from Governor Kodos. His test scores had been so off the charts that the colonial teachers didn’t know what to do with him. They had asked Kodos for his personal attention.

Jim held no small amount of awe for the man. He was like the father he never had. He had him
read the classics and debate philosophy and gave him impossible equations to solve. Twice a week, he would visit him just as school ended for what he termed a private tutoring lesson.

Jim soaked up the knowledge like a sponge, always eager for more, asking an endless stream of questions that Kodos answered with an amused glint in his eye. He always seemed to have an answer.

While they talked, they would play chess. Kodos didn’t coddle him or insult his intelligence by playing below his true skill level. Jim didn’t win a single game his entire time there.

He never gave up, though. He was determined to beat him one day.

He beamed up at the man who was like a father to him and he moved his queen.

He woke up with a jolt, breathing hard, eyes wide and fixed on nothing in the darkness.

It was fine. It was fine. It was just a dream. He was off of Tarsus and Kodos was dead.

Kodos. Was. Dead.

“Jim?” Bones asked.

Shit. Maybe he could pretend to be asleep.

“Jim, I know you’re awake,” he said. “What happened? What—Do you want to talk about it?”

“No,” he breathed. His voice sounded broken and small to his own ears.

And then Bones was getting up and crossing the room and sitting on Jim’s bed, an anchoring presence, so why was Jim’s breathing getting faster? He choked back a sob and sat up, trying to retain some semblance of dignity, trying to swallow down his tears.

Bones pulled him close, gently shushing and rubbing circles in his back.

Jim came undone, sobbing into his shoulder and clutching at his shirt, crying the way he hadn’t done since the first night the guards took him, hugging him the way no one had since he had left Kevin behind in a San Francisco orphanage.

He laughed bitterly at the thought and snuggled closer to Bones.

He calls Bones Leonard one day, mockingly. Bones returns play equally by calling him James, and Jim freezes, blood stilling like ice water in his veins.

“Jim?” Bones asked, stopping in front of him, concern clear on his face.

Jim’s breaths are short and shallow and cold and his head is buzzing, floating unpleasantly. He’s going to die. He’s going to die.

Bones recognizes a panic attack when he sees one and calls on all his psych training and thank god he knows what to do. Jim is aware of nothing until suddenly he’s back in their dorm, bundled up on
Bones’ bed while he cooks a pot of soup.

He doesn’t ask about it and Jim is grateful.

He thinks he loves Bones.

He’s never—He swore he would never—it’s dangerous. He can’t say why, can’t explain it even to himself, but he feels pure fear in every cell in his body when he thinks about it.

Nothing good can come from love. Love for Kevin was what drove Jim to go and approach those guards all that time ago. Tamara and Tom loved each other. Tamara had loved Jim the way Jim loved Bones, and she had tried to pull him away from the warehouse guards one night and it got her killed. Her love got her killed. Jim’s love got him raped. His father’s love got him killed. His mother’s love destroyed her life, and the lives of both her sons.

Love was poison, and Jim felt love for Bones.

He was going to have to change that.

“Jim!” Bones stormed into his room, holding a padd high in the air. There was anger clear on his face, but under that, deeper, there was hurt. “Did you request a room change?”

“Yeah?” he said. “Why?”

“Why?!” Bones spit. “Why the hell would you do that?”

He shrugged. “I don’t wanna live with you anymore.”

Bones folded his arms and stared at him. “Is this about me calling you—Is this about your panic attack last week?”

“This has nothing to do with that,” he said warningly.

“Really? Because you’ve been avoiding me ever since,” he said. “Look. You don’t wanna talk about it. That’s fine. But you can’t just cut me out of your life because you think I got too close or something.”

“You can’t tell me what to do,” he said. Then he latched onto that. “That’s why I want to move out. You’re super bossy and annoying and I don’t like you.”

“And you’re a bratty asshole with serious intimacy issues. We’re friends anyway,” he said. “You can’t do this, Jim. It’s not healthy. You need to talk to someone. If not me, then a professional.”

He snorted. “Like that ever works.”

“Jim—”

“No, shut up! You aren’t my friend anymore!”

“You fucking idiot, get back here—“
“Fuck you!”

“I’m not leaving.” Bones planted his feet. “Curse and scream all you like, kid. We’re going to talk about this.”

Jim huffed and tried to shove past him, but Bones wouldn’t let him, grabbing him by the arm. Adrenaline and fear spiked through Jim, and he whirled and slammed his fist straight into Bones’ face.

Bones dropped his arm, touching a hand to his lip and pulling it back to look at the blood in shock. He looked up at Jim, and Jim couldn’t read him, couldn’t tell what the hell that look meant. His eyes watered and he blinked hurriedly, storming out the door and slamming it shut behind him.
Class Debate

The ten-year anniversary snuck up on him, really.

It was a normal day. Relatively. Day #5 without Bones. His new roommate was an ass but an ignorable ass. It was a sunny day out, beautiful weather, and he was running late, as per usual.

He thought briefly of taking a muffin to eat on his way but then decided against it.

He stepped into his Interplanetary Diplomacy and Ethics class and the students were practically buzzing, a low hum of news and chatter.

He slid into a seat beside Gary Mitchell. “What’s going on? What’s everybody talking about?”

He shrugged. “Apparently some government documents got declassified and now it’s this big scandal.”

The professor cleared her throat and walked over to the holoboard, picking up a stylus and writing in big letters: TARSUS IV.

Jim had this buzzing in his ears. His head felt funny. Like he might pass out or something.

“I’m sure you’ve all heard the news by now. In light of that, I thought this would be an excellent opportunity to use a real-world example as a case study. Today, we’re going to discuss what exactly went wrong on Tarsus IV.”

It was a sensation he had felt before. Back on the colony. He would get so weak and lightheaded with hunger that he would be afraid to fall asleep for fear that he would never wake up again. It had happened to Shravan. It had almost happened to Kevin.

“Tarsus IV was a remote Federation colony that fell victim to famine. In an effort to save as many lives as he could, Governor Kodos executed half the population so that the other half would have enough to eat. In total, 4018 people died. On the other hand, though, 4006 of them survived.”

Jim hadn’t eaten breakfast that day.

“However, even with the drastic measures that he took, there still wasn’t sufficient food to keep every colonist happy. One month before Starfleet arrived on the planet as part of a routine check-up, the remaining colonists rioted and stormed the warehouse where the rations were being stored. In the resulting chaos, it was set on fire, and the entire food supply was lost. A period of savagery followed. Many colonists fled in search of food elsewhere on the planet. The survivors have taken to calling this period the Red Month, due to the amount of blood that was shed during it.”

It had been ten years and he took food for granted now. He just assumed that he could get some later. That he would always have that privilege.

“Today we’re going to debate what, if anything, Governor Kodos should have done differently.”

Jim was aware his mouth was hanging open slightly. Catching flies, as Bones would say.
A cadet with a flouncy pink ponytail raised her hand. “How did Kodos decide who to kill? Was it luck of the draw?”

“No. He tried to determine who would be most beneficial to society, and then those who were not were executed,” Professor Nguyen said.

He remembered Kevin crying himself to sleep night after night, wailing that he missed his mommy and daddy. They had been farm laborers, members of Tarsus’s lowest social class.

“Isn’t that sorta like eugenics?” a guy who Jim normally regarded as an asshole drawled.

“Some have said that,” Professor Nguyen said. “While in college, Kodos did write several papers on his theories on the subject as well as the Eugenics Wars. Some have claimed that he supported it.”

“I read that he killed all the disabled. That’s definitely eugenics, right?” another cadet asked.

“My mom was on Tarsus IV,” someone said. “She says it wasn’t like that at all. Most of the people who were killed were criminals or so weak they were about to die anyway. Like really old people or ones with bad immune systems that were about to fail because of the famine anyway. Keeping them alive would have just been prolonging the inevitable. They were mercy killings, really.”

He was thirteen years old and wheezing from an allergic reaction, hoping against hope that he wouldn’t go into anaphylactic shock, hiding up in his room so no one would find him and take him to the hospital. People never returned from the hospital.

One of his friends from school had gotten pneumonia, so easily treatable, just one little hypo and then you’re all better. He went to the doctor’s and got the hypo. He died the next day.

His mother killed herself out of guilt. She thought she could have prevented it, that she should have known somehow, should have taken the rumors more seriously.

“I heard he killed the little kids, man. You can’t defend that,” someone said.

The previous cadet shrugged. “I’m not defending everything he did. I’m just saying. Who he chose to get rid of made sense. It left the strongest, healthiest, most useful and law-abiding people alive, and that gave them the best chance at survival.”

He remembered a teenager who had stolen food for his younger brother and made the kill list because all offenses were death penalty offenses. He remembered getting out of juvie for stealing a candy bar two days before everyone in juvie was slaughtered. The criminal element was not beneficial to society. They did not deserve mercy. They had not earned the right to live.

He had stolen a candy bar. His middle school guidance counselor had been so disappointed in him.

He hadn’t even gotten to eat it. He had been so hungry in juvie.

Professor Nguyen stalked elegantly to lean back against the front of her desk. Jim had always admired her. She was his favorite professor. She was knowledgeable to the extreme and genuinely pushed him to think. His own personal ethics were becoming more defined from being in her class.
She was one hell of a professor, with a commanding presence that could cow starship captains, and yet everyone was comfortable to speak up in her class.

“Did Kodos do the right thing?” she asked bluntly. “What should he have done? Killed 4000 people or let 8000 slowly starve?”

A cadet frowned. “He should’ve sent out a distress signal.”

“According to reports, he tried to do so. It unfortunately didn’t send due to ion interference.”

“Didn’t anybody notice when the entire planet just dropped off the grid?” someone asked.

“Eventually. However, Tarsus IV was a very small, very backwater colony on the edges of the frontier, and people were used to communications being down due to the ion cloud around it. The check-up ship did come early, but not early enough for most of the colony.”

“How long did the famine last?”

“Just short of two years,” the professor said.

527 days after the guards—the soldiers—went into the colonial school and shot the place to hell along with everyone in it.

Of course, that wasn’t when the famine itself had started. That was just when Jim’s personal hell had. That was just one more survival measure in a long string of them for the local government.

“I think he did the right thing,” the girl whose mom had been there said. “Better for some people to die than for everyone to, right? I think the Vulcans have a saying about that. ‘The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few’.”

“But not everyone would have died though,” someone else said.

“You don’t know that for sure,” she retorted. “There was so little food. Remember the Red Month? Even with just 4000 people to feed, the rations were too little.”

He was running into the woods, hungry adults at his heels. He dropped the bags he was carrying, and some fell on them like a pack of wolves, but others kept following, filled with more bloodthirst and rage than they were with hunger.

Or maybe they just preferred the idea of fresh, hot meat.

Had that girl’s mother been one of them? What exactly had she told her daughter about how it was that she came to survive when 4018 others didn’t?

“I want all of you to think about that,” the professor said. “We’ll continue to debate this topic for the rest of the week. On Friday, you’ll have a paper due on what you what have done in Kodos’ place to save as many lives as possible. Class dismissed.”
Jim slammed into his new dorm room and dropped his bag just beyond the door. He grabbed a beer out of the mini stasis unit and collapsed onto the couch.

For all of two seconds.

An idle mind was a wandering mind and Jim definitely couldn’t handle that today.

He pulled out the padd that acted as his astrophysics textbook and read through three chapters and answered and submitted 27 review questions, some of which contained multiple parts. He wrote an argumentative essay for his Federation History class on how the Prime Directive could be improved. He breezed through his Theoretical Mathematics homework.

It was 2027 hours and he was jittery and wired and his asshole roommate wasn’t even here for him to pick a fight with.

He practiced his Andorian conjugations for the five verb tenses they had learned so far and then taught himself two others. He played three games of chess against online opponents. He did the next section of Theoretical Mathematics problems that hadn’t been assigned yet. And the section after that.

He read through another chapter and a half in his Astrophysics text book and then slammed it shut in a huff.

He opened his padd and pulled up the suggested readings for Interplanetary Diplomacy and Ethics.

Two were firsthand accounts from survivors, both of which had been on the ‘good’ list. Another was an analysis of Kodos’ involvement with eugenics theories. The fourth document was just a sheet of hard statistics and data.

4018 dead. 4006 alive.

92% of the dead killed by phaser fire. 5% killed by otherwise sustained injuries. 2% killed by starvation or starvation-related diseases. 1% never recovered.

9 witnesses, identities classified.

5 survivors from the kill list, identities classified. Survivors were minors during the famine.

Gov. Alton J. Kodos killed by otherwise sustained injuries in fire that began the Red Month. No surviving family.

Jim turned off his padd forcefully.

He went to the gym.

He was assistant instructor in Advanced Hand-to-Hand Combat and he let the punching bag know that.
“Whew,” a man whistled. “What’d the bag do to get on your bad side?”

He grinned. “Looked at me funny.”

The other cadet smiled right back at him. “How about you and me go a few rounds? Guarantee I’m a lot more fun to fight than the bag is.”

Jim looked him over. The cadet was covered in sharply defined muscles, no doubt finely tuned and well-trained. He was about the same height and weight as Jim was, though. If he had to guess, he’d say they’d be pretty evenly matched.

“Alright,” he said.

Jim stepped out of the shower in the other cadet’s dorm, wrapping a towel around his waist. During their third round of particularly intense and aggressive sparring, the guy had gotten a boner while pinning Jim to the mat, and, well. Now it was morning and Jim was in the guy’s shower.

He walked out to the mini kitchenette.

“Hey,” Random Guy said. “I’m making eggs, you want some?”

It hit Jim like a punch to the gut.

He had come straight back to the dorm after classes yesterday and skipped lunch and dinner. All three meals. He had skipped all three meals.

The last time he’d eaten had been dinner two days ago.

He hadn’t even noticed.

Was he really so used to starving? He hadn’t even felt hungry. His stomach had hurt, sure, but he hadn’t recognized that as hunger. It was just background. His natural state of being was with an ache in his stomach. It was good, it was familiar, he could handle that.

“Hey… uh, dude? Are you okay?”

He was shaking.

His ears were ringing so loud. His breaths were coming fast and short. He looked to the other guy with panic in his eyes.

“Whoa, okay, calm down. Do you need me to call someone? Who do you… Who do I call?”

He swallowed. He breathed. He had to answer this. “Bones. Um, Leonard McCoy. He’s… med track. Should be in… xenobiology right now.”

“What’s his comm number?”

Jim gave it to him and the guy pressed it into his comm unit. “Hi, this is Hikaru Sulu, I’m looking for Leonard McCoy? … Great. I’ve got your friend here, he says his name is—What’s your
name?"

“Jim Kirk.”

“—Jim Kirk. He’s in pretty bad shape, I think someone needs to come and pick him up…”

Bones led him by the hand back to their old dorm room and sat Jim on his bed. He instantly curled into his friend, still shaking somewhat, but now under much better control.

“What happened, kid? What’s got you so shook up?” Bones asked, and Jim choked on a hysterical sob and just shook his head. “It’s okay. It’s okay, darling. You’re alright now. You don’t have to tell me what happened if you aren’t ready.”

And then Jim really did start crying.

Bones smoothed down his hair, shushing gently. “It’s alright, darling. When was the last time you ate?”

“Sunday.”

Bones sort of froze at that. He kissed the top of Jim’s head and pulled away. “I’m going to make you two cheeseburgers and then we’ll replicate some pecan pie to go with it, alright?”

“Bones, you don’t have to go to all that trouble. I can—I can get my own food. I was a shitty friend to you, you don’t need to—“

He shook his head. “I don’t care. I’m not gonna listen to none of that nonsense, Jimmy. It’s not trouble, and you are worth it.”

Jim swallowed.

He moved back in with Bones. He apologized for being an asshole.

Bones told him he could make it up to him by cooking his meals for the rest of the week.

Jim was still scared but he was going to push through it.

The second lecture on Tarsus let out and Jim made a mad dash for the door.

He headed straight for the nearest cheap and shitty bar.

“I’ll have a Romulan ale.”

The bartender gave him a look. “Shit’s illegal, man. We don’t serve it here.”

Jim slid him his credit chip and the bartender eyed it. He nodded and went to the back, returning with a pale blue drink in an opaque glass, not that that was going to fool anybody.

He really didn’t care how much it cost or how expelled it could get him, Jim definitely needed a drink strong enough to knock out a Vulcanoid.
He woke up in Starfleet Medical getting his stomach pumped.

Bones sat slumped in the chair next to his bed. He looked like he had aged ten years.

“Vous have alcohol poisoning,” he said, his voice croaky. “Wh—Why’d you do this to yourself?”

“You said I didn’t have to tell you.”

“Jim, are you suicidal?”

“No!”

“What triggered this? The panic attacks, the not eating, the drinking until you’re in the hospital, what… Why are you doing this?”

He said nothing. He licked his lips.

“You need to talk to someone.”

“No.”

“That wasn’t a request. I’m your acting physician, and I’m deeming it medically necessary for you to see a counselor.”

“Fuck you, Bones.”

“You don’t want to do it? Fine. Talk to me then. I’m licensed in psychiatry. But it’s me or a stranger, Jim. Your pick.”

His skin was cold, arms covered in goosebumps. At the same time, he felt like he was burning up. Like maybe he needed to puke.

“You,” he said quietly. “But you have to swear never to tell anyone.”

“Doctor-patient confidentiality is a thing, kid.”

“Swear anyway.”

He looked him hard in the eye. “Alright. I swear.”

Jim nodded. Swallowed.

Took a deep breath.

“I was on Tarsus IV.”
“I was thirteen when I was taken there to live with my uncle. It was supposed to be a punishment. Didn’t really fit the crime.

”Things weren’t going too great for me back then. I mean, I guess they never have been, really. But Frank, he... he made my life hell.

”Kodos was different. He was so nice to me. He didn’t see me as just George Kirk’s son or some know-it-all brat. He thought I had potential because of me. Because of who I was. That’s what kept me off the kill list for the first few rounds. Then I guess the novelty of the kid genius wore off. It usually doesn’t take that long. I’m surprised I lasted as long as I did, honestly. Guess Kodos is sentimental like that.

“We didn’t know what was going on at first. It was just rumors, and no one could prove anything, and the colonial guard said they were investigating but they were just Kodos’ soldiers the whole time.

”People would just... disappear. Anybody who got sick would mysteriously die from complications or a misdiagnosis or accidental overdose or some other bullshit. Going to the doctor’s was a death sentence. Everybody knew it too, but it was just a rumor. Nobody could prove anything.

”I guess I still get kind of nervous around hospitals. Eugenics’ll do that to you.

”The food supply just got shorter and shorter. People started stealing. Everyone was so paranoid. It was... barbaric. Nobody trusted anybody. Frank gave me just enough food to keep me from starving, barely. He kept most of it to himself. I started stealing to.

”I got caught a couple times, spent a while in juvie because of it.

”That was when the first formal announcement was made. Two days after I got paroled, every currently convicted criminal in the colony was executed. Lined up in chains and disintegrated with a phaser one at a time. Or so I heard.

”Two days. I got to live because of those two days. I wouldn’t be here otherwise.

”I didn’t blame Kodos. I wasn’t scared of him. The situation, sure, but not him. He was just doing what made sense. It was logical. Criminals were all bad people and a burden to society. Even though we were all just starving and scared and doing what we had to too.

”You know how I was able to rationalize it? I told myself I wasn’t one of them. Not really. Even though I bet almost every single criminal executed was in for the same crime I was. People didn’t want to think about that though. Or maybe they didn’t care. It prevented more thefts, at least, or it was supposed to. In reality, thieves just got better at hiding.

“All disabled people were next. It’s so fucked up, but people didn’t outright condemn that as wrong. Sure, some did. But others were so hungry they just didn’t care. People agreed with Kodos. A lot of them. The ones who were sure they’d make the good list. That’s how he was able to do it.

”I almost didn’t make the cut the first time. ’Cuz of my allergies, shitty immune system. Being born in space surrounded by radiation and all that. I didn’t even get mad at Kodos though. I was a little scared and a lot relieved, but I trusted him to do the right thing. For the greater good. I always trusted him.
"He’s the one who taught me how to play chess, you know. I never once beat him.

"But the system is three strikes you’re out, and I was on the kill list for the third round of executions. Those were based on age. Kids and old people. Burdens on everyone else, and therefore worthy of death.

"There was a school shooting. Kodos’ government— the soldiers just came into the school and started shooting everyone. We were screaming. Some of those kids were so young. Kevin, he was in kindergarten. But the guards just kept shooting. They didn’t care. They wanted us to die. That was the point.

"I heard there were more execution rounds after that, but I wasn’t around for them. Kodos killed what he thought were useless people. The unemployed, people who were too easily replaceable or whose jobs weren’t necessary anymore. Lots of us kids’ parents got killed. Richer people seemed to do better.

"There were only nine survivors who actually witnessed Kodos executing people. Four were some of his soldiers. Five were us illegal, kill-list kids.

"There were thirteen of us to start with, including me. I swore I would do whatever I had to to keep all of us alive. I failed. Obviously.

"The first to die was Gavin. He got so hungry he decided to eat some infected crops. It killed him.

"Next was Hunter, who was one of the survivors’ brothers. His big sister killed him. Tripped him in front of a predator so that it would stop to eat him and she could get away. She said she would’ve tripped me instead, but I wasn’t close enough.

"After that was Angela, who was just the sweetest little girl. She ate some bugs who had eaten some fungus. Didn’t know any better.

"Then there was Jenny. Another girl in the camp killed her in a fight over a bag of chips.

"And then there was Bobbi. We banished her from the camp for stealing food. Found her corpse a few days later. Broken leg had got her.

"Next was Shravan. Sweet Andorian girl. Only non-human in the camp and also the only one to actually die of starvation. She just fell asleep and never woke back up.

"We ate her.

"Then Tamara. She... She was like a bib sister to me. After Shravan, I started sneaking back into the colony to steal food. I swore no one else would starve to death. But one day, Kodos’ guards caught me, and Tamara was there and she went berserk on them. They shot her right in the head. I got away, though.

"And, I forgot, there was Baby. Lenore. I think someone ate her. We accidentally left her alone too long.

"Then there was the ‘Red Month,’ which I guess is what people who were on the good list are calling it. The colonists went insane pretty much and lit the warehouse with all the food in it on fire. Brilliant strategizing there, really made things better.

"Anyway, a shit ton of people died that night. Everyone pretty much fled the colony after that. There was no food left there anyway. So people scattered into the woods.
"Most of the animals within miles and miles of the colony had all been hunted. You had to walk pretty far to find anything.

"Just as another kid was about to die, Starfleet came and saved us all.

"And that was it. Happily ever after, 4006 people were saved and Kodos died. Now I’m here."

Jim finally cast his eyes up and looked at Bones. The man looked heartbroken, tears welling in his eyes.

"Kid—" he said. Then he shook his head and just pulled Jim in for a hug.
Bones took him back to their dorm and made him soup. He wouldn’t stop glancing over at him every five seconds on the walk there. While Jim ate, he openly stared.

”You don’t have to say anything,” he said, because the man was clearly searching for something, anything, to tell Jim. “I get it. It’s fucked up.”

”It’s...,” he said. “I’m so sorry, kid. You didn’t deserve that. You deserved so much better.”

He snorted. Bones seemed distraught. He covered Jim’s hand with his own.

”I’m serious, kid. Nothing you ever did or could have done would make you deserve what happened to you. Nobody deserves that.”

The other kids certainly hadn’t, but Jim? Jim was disgusting.

He shook his head. “You don’t know me. You don’t know what I’ve done.”

“So tell me.”

He shook his head. No. For all his talk, he was a selfish, selfish man and he wanted to keep Bones for as long as he could.

Jim was thirteen years old the first time he took a human life. He was thirteen when he voted to banish a starving nine-year-old out of their camp and to certain death. He was thirteen when he traded his virginity for his life with two of Kodos’ ‘guards.’ He was fourteen when he found out that Andorian tastes like chicken. He was fourteen when he started regularly selling himself for food. He was fourteen when a pregnant girl gave her life trying to rescue him.

People like Bones shouldn’t even know people like him. Bones was too good and Jim was the scum of the galaxy.

He had done whatever he had to to survive. Things no sane or good person would even consider.

The thing that haunted him the most was honestly what he had put the other kids through. He had killed Bobbi, killed Tamara, killed her baby. He had dared Erin to jump out of a tree and she lost her leg. She suffers from chronic pain now due to how badly done the surgery he had performed in the woods was. He had permanently disfigured Tom— half his face looked like melted candle wax. Because Jim didn’t know how to use a dermal regenerator.

Why hadn’t he thought to learn that before? He taught himself how to hack through top security programming, but not basic first aid skills?

What a dumbass.

Dani should have tripped him instead of her brother. Maybe then the guilt wouldn’t have eaten away her mind so bad that she was missing years of her life.

“It’s okay. Whatever you did, Jim, it’s behind you now. You’re not the same person you were back then. I’m sure you only did whatever it was you had to do.”

Jim shook his head again.
"Listen. You say I don’t know you, but I do. I know who you are now. And you’re a good person."

"I’m a murderer," he said. “I’ve killed people before."

Bones visibly tried to school the shock off his features. "In self defense?"

"I broke into her house to steal her food and then I murdered her when she caught me. She had a baby in the next room."

Bones went silent.

Jim’s blood was thrumming in his veins. He felt electric. He couldn’t move a muscle if he tried. It felt a bit like dying.

He waited for the other shoe to drop.

He knew one thing for sure. Bones wouldn’t have made it off Tarsus alive. He was too good. He would’ve refused to eat stolen food, refused to eat Shravan’s body. Would have seen right through Jim’s bullshit about how he robbed the warehouse and refused to eat that food too. He would have tried to save him like Tamara had, even when he insisted he didn’t need saving. He would’ve argued for Bobbi to get to stay and then taken off with her when she got banished anyway. He would’ve tried to defend her and gotten himself killed in her place.

He would have done all the right things and he would have died so, so quickly.

“Is that the full story?” Bones asked. “You expect me to believe that you just killed a woman in cold blood for absolutely no reason? When you were a little kid?”

“I wasn’t that little. And I definitely wasn’t as innocent as whatever you’re picturing.”

”That’s what worries me,” he said. “Eat your goddamn soup before it gets cold.”

He ate a spoonful begrudgingly. “You can cut the act now. I’m not stupid. We’re done, we’re never gonna talk again. You should never have been hanging around with a guy like me in the first place.”

”SHut up,” Bones said. “You’re an asshole. And a stupid asshole, at that. We’re still friends and I don’t wanna hear another word outta you about it, ‘cuz as far as I’m concerned, you don’t get a say in the matter.”

He stabbed a finger at Jim’s soup. “I made that for you, you prick, and you’re gonna eat every last bite of it.”

Jim glared and did as he was told.

“I can talk to the professor for you, if that’s what this is about. You don’t have to say anything yourself.”

"No, Bones, I’m doing this. I’ll be fine."

Bones huffed and gave him a look.

"I’m serious. I can handle it.”

Bones grumbled, muttering about damn stubborn farm boys who refused to take care of
themselves.

They walked into the classroom and sat next to each other, prepared to listen to the third lecture and debate on Tarsus IV.

Jim paced around their dorm, unsure what to do with his hands. At first he’d been wringing them, then that had felt weird and he’d started biting his nails. Then he ran out of nails. Now his arms hung limply at his sides, feeling awkward, and his hands might have been shaking but he couldn’t get them to stop.

"Jim," Bones said. "Jim, stop this. Sit down."

He shook his head and kept pacing.

"Kid, this ain’t healthy."

"Don’t you think I know that?" he whirled on him. "How stupid do you think I am? I had a fucking flashback in the middle of a class lecture, how much of an idiot do I have to be to assume that’s in any way healthy?"

Bones said nothing. Jim growled and went back to pacing.

He bit his lip. He chewed on his thumbnail. He paced the room.

"You need to see a therapist."

"The hell good’ll it do?"

"Jim."

He sighed. "It’s not gonna change anything, Bones. It’s not gonna make the rest of the week go by any easier, and I’ll be fine after that. I don’t need to see a therapist."

"Jim, you objectively do. This is me, as a doctor, telling you you need medical treatment."

He rolled his eyes.

He grabbed his leather jacket from by the door. “I’m going out.”

"I’m coming with you."

"I don’t need a babysitter."

"Yes you do."

The next day wasn’t any better. They went through the same routine all over again.

One more day, Bones kept saying. Just one more day and the week is over.

Jim laughed when he realized he hadn’t even started his argumentative essay. He kept laughing until he was crying and Bones took his drink away.

This night was different from last night, though, because Bones was matching him drink for drink and he sure seemed to need it.
He is not sure how either of them managed to stumble their way back into their dorm.

And then suddenly they were touching.

Hands pawing, ripping clothes off, blundering their way towards a bed and reaching for the lube in Jim’s nightstand. Bones pounding into him, Jim chanting a mantra of “I love you, I love you, I love you,” fucking terrified, in an ecstatic freefall.

Bones tried to kiss him as he came, but Jim wouldn’t let him. He wasn’t nearly drunk enough for that.

Jim jumped awake, leaping out of a nightmare, making Bones groan and wake up beneath him.

Both their eyes widened simultaneously.

Jim jumped off of his very naked friend’s body and scratched at the back of his neck. Bones cleared his throat and covered himself up with the blankets.

“Never happened?” he asked.

“Never happened,” Jim quickly agreed.

“It was a drunken mistake,” Bones said firmly. Jim nodded rapidly.

“So, uh, do you remember—“

“No.”

“Oh, thank god.” Jim let out a huge sigh of relief.


“Probably for the best,” Jim said. Let him think they had done some really weird shit. It was way better than what had really happened.

Bones grimaced. “Please get dressed.”

Jim laughed and made a flirty remark and Bones rolled his eyes and made breakfast and they forgot it ever happened.

Or Bones did, anyway.

Jim submitted a twelve-page vent-y, diary entry of an essay on why Kodos was the worst villain in the history of ever and received a 76% on it. Professor Nguyen didn’t think his tone was very professional. She said his writing style needed improvement and the paper was subpar compared to his usual work.

“Bones, I have something to tell you,” Jim said. “I-I’m in love with you.”
Bones gave him a long, hard look.

"Sit down, kid. We got things to talk about." Jim obliged quietly. "You ever been in love before?"

"No."

"Ever been in a serious relationship?"

"No."

"Ever dated anyone at all?"

"No."

"Before you met me, how long had you gone without any real friends?"

"U-um, since Tarsus? Bones this is getting depressing."

"I'm making my point, kid. This is important," he said. "You've never slept with anybody you cared about before."

Jim frowned. Or maybe he was just practicing his best kicked puppy impression, Bones couldn't tell.

"When you think about me, how do you feel?"

Jim shrugged. "I don't know how to describe it. You're really important though, and I want to spend a lot of time with you and hug you sometimes."

Bones nodded. "Do you remember having sex with me?"

Jim nodded.

"Do you ever think about it?"

"Um? It seemed pretty significant."

"No, I mean, do you ever think about the actual act of making love?"

Jim looked distinctly uncomfortable now. "...No."

"Why?"

"It freaks me out? I don't know, it just seems weird."

"That's because you aren't attracted to me."

"What?"

"You aren't in love with me. You're just lonely and affection-starved," Bones said. "Also, you need some experience with relationships."

For some reason, that was a huge relief.
Ruth

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bones was absolutely 100% right and also he was a genius, Jim decided.

Jim should definitely start dating people. He had never been in a relationship before. It hadn’t been intentional, of course, he never intended to stay alone for his whole life, or even for this long. It had just never happened. It never occurred to him to that people might want to spend more than one night with him.

The closest thing he’d had to that was the guards back on Tarsus and his regulars when he’d been a sex worker.

People liked Jim’s body. People didn’t like Jim.

But Ruth… Ruth seemed to like Jim.

Ruth was a pretty, curvy blonde lab tech with a sweet as honey smile and eyes like molten chocolate. Her laugh tinkled like bells, and it was so easy to get it out of her, she laughed at all of Jim’s shitty jokes. She was brilliant and kind and perfect.

When Jim asked her out, he stuttered and tripped over his words and she had the biggest smile on her face.

She took the flowers and kissed his cheek asked if Friday at seven would work. Jim blushed furiously and nodded.

They took things slow.

Very slow.

But after the fourth date where Jim successfully dodged anything coming even close to the realm of physicality, Ruth got impatient.

“Jim,” she said, taking his hands in her own. “Why won’t you kiss me?”

“I--” he froze. There was no non-embarrassing way to say this.

Or he could just not. He could just kiss her. He had given everything else away, why not his kiss?

He was saving his first kiss for the person he was going to marry.

What if that person was Ruth anyway?

“I’ve never kissed anyone before,” he confessed quickly. Ruth’s eyes widened. She dropped his hands.

“Are you saying you’re a…”
"No."

Now she just looked confused.

"Jim, will you tell me what’s going on? It’s just-- I’ve known you for a while now, we’re dating, but I still feel like I don’t know anything about you."

Maybe dating had been a bad idea. What did Bones know anyway? Jim didn’t want this.

There was no getting around it. If he was serious about her, then she was going to find out eventually. Better to tell her sooner rather than later, that way she can dump him now before either of them gets too invested and she feels betrayed when she finds out later.

It had been nice while it lasted, anyway. Ruth had just been so overwhelmingly normal. It left Jim’s head spinning, that he could have something so nice. The fact that they weren’t sleeping together-- that he was having a *relationship*-- had really gone to his head.

Ruth was so perfect. What the hell was Jim thinking, dating her anyway? She was miles outside his league.

“I, um-- God, I guess I’ll just get this over with. I used to be a sex worker, when I was younger,” he said. “I-- I know I have no right to ask you this, especially now that we’re over, but can you please… not tell anyone? Coming to the Academy was a fresh start for me. I don’t want it to get all over the school.”

“Jim,” she frowned. “What are you talking about? We aren’t over.”

“We aren’t?”

“No,” she said. “No, Jim, this is fine. I’m not going to judge you for your past. That’s not who you are anymore.”

But it was.

“You’ll kiss me when you’re ready. It’s fine. It’s not that big a deal.”

She smiled warmly and Jim could almost trick himself into believing her.

They went to her apartment that night and Jim made her come five times. He kissed her everywhere except for her lips. She was a moaning, writhing mess beneath him. And he had thought she was beautiful before.

He made her breakfast in bed that morning and spent the whole week apologizing without words. She would kiss him on the cheek. They didn’t talk about it.

They had been together for three months when winter break rolled around. Bones went down to Georgia to be with Joanna and try not to rip Jocelyn’s head off. Ruth invited Jim to come up to Minnesota with her and meet her family.

He said yes.
“So, Jim,” Mr. Erikssen said, buttering a roll at the dinner table. “Ruthie here hasn’t told us all that much about you, except that you’re a cadet in Starfleet.”

“Well, I’m afraid there’s not that much to tell at this point, sir. I’m really focusing in on my studies. I plan to graduate from the command track and become an officer within three years.”

“That’s ambitious,” Mrs. Erikssen said. “Are you two going to stay together, even over the distance? I assume you’ll want to get posted on a starship right away.”

“Of course,” Jim said easily. “But I don’t think distance will be a problem. Starfleet’s mission is one of peaceful scientific exploration, and there’s always lab tech positions available on starships. We’ll be posted together, in all likelihood.”

“Oh, really?” Mrs. Erikssen asked. “Ruth never told us she planned on leaving Earth.”

Ruth was doing a stunning impression of a deer in the headlights. Her eyes were as wide as saucers.

“I mean, there’s plenty of time to discuss the future later on,” she said. “I won’t graduate for another year, and Jim’s still in his first year at the Academy either way. Shipping out is a long way off.” She hurriedly swallowed down another spoonful of food. “Mmm. Mom, this hotdish is delicious. You have to give me the recipe.”

Tonight was the night. Jim was sure of it. Jim was as nervous as he could, but it was a good nervous. There was no true doubt beneath it.

He wore a blue dress shirt that matched his eyes, black slacks, and a tie he borrowed from Bones. Also cologne he borrowed from Bones. And dress shoes.

Bones, of course, did not know about this. He was volunteering that night at the clinic, that old bleeding heart, which gave Jim the perfect opportunity to not-steal from him.

He still didn’t understand why Bones was his friend.

But tonight wasn’t the night for getting depressed and thinking about that sort of thing. No, tonight was the night he asked Ruth to marry him, and then she’d say yes, and then he’d kiss the hell outta her.

He stumbled back into the dorm room the next morning with a raging hangover.

“Hey,” Bones said, glancing briefly at him, not really looking. “Did you eat breakfast at Ruth’s? ‘Cuz if not, I can make some more of this.”

Jim didn’t say anything.

Somewhere around the fifth bar he had been to, he had lost Bones’ tie. No clue what happened to it. Last he saw, a Risan man was using it to tie his hands above his head.
He was such a shitty friend.

“Jim?” Bones asked, looking at him with concern.

“Ruth broke up with me,” he said. “I proposed last night.”

Bones immediately came over and led him to the couch to sit down. “Tell me everything. Why’d you propose?”

“Yeah, she asked that too. Apparently five months is too soon.”

“Well. Yeah, Jim. It is.”

“I love her though,” he said. “But apparently-- apparently to her, we were just fooling around. Having fun, she said.”

He hugged a pillow to his chest. Bones was saying things, but he wasn’t listening.

If Ruth had taught him one thing, it was that he had been right before.

Love was dangerous.

Love was poison.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so I'm not sure how obvious it is with my writing, but I am not exactly familiar with mainstream American dating culture. Relationships like Jim and Ruth's are completely foreign to me. Like, in the culture I grew up in, you date solely with marriage in mind, only once you're over eighteen, and just to give you guys some perspective, I know a couple who only met and knew each other for two weeks before getting engaged. Basically, I completely bullshitted my way through this chapter and wrote the exact opposite of what I know. Constructive criticism is definitely welcome, especially in the form of tips on how to make it more realistic, because I don't even know if it is or not.
"Jim!" a voice called out. "Jimmy Kirk! Is that you?"

Jim turned around to face a cadet who he totally didn't recognize. "Uh, yeah. That's me."

"It's me, Gary Mitchell!"

"Gary?!" Jim asked. "Dude! I totally didn't recognize you! How are you, man?"

"Great," he smirked, and then looked Jim over slowly. "You're looking pretty fine yourself."

Jim chuckled and threw out a wink. "God, dude, it's been forever. I haven't seen you since middle school."

"Middle school? Coulda sworn you moved away in elementary school."

"Nah, seventh grade. I was thirteen."

"Okay, don't remind me, you were on... the Tantalus colony."

"Dude," Jim said. "That's a penal colony."

"What?"

"A giant prison, you dumbass," he said affectionately. "Please tell me you haven't been telling everyone I was on Tantalus this whole time."

Gary shrugged. "What can I say, Jimmy, you always seemed like a troublemaker to me. So where have you been all this time?"

"Eh, around, bouncing from planet to planet. Before I joined up, I was actually back in Riverside for a few years. Surprised we didn't meet up there."

"Yeah, surprising." Gary said. "Hey, speaking of meeting up, how 'bout you swing by my dorm and we get reacquainted?"

The next two years passed by like a dream: blissful, easy, and Jim couldn't quite believe they were real. Bones was still his friend. He didn't seem to be going anywhere. He was doing well in all his classes. He hadn't touched any drugs since early on in his first semester, and he only really drank on weekends. He actually did a surprising amount of staying in and studying. He slept with Gaila and Gary regularly (but never at the same time, because Gaila hated Gary for reasons she wouldn't share), and both of them seemed to be his friends too. Even Pike seemed to care about him.

He ate three meals a day almost every day. It was mostly under control, and his eating habits still yo-yoed a little bit, but Bones always noticed and yelled him back into healthfulness. He had a steady place to sleep, a stable living environment. He had clean clothes to wear. The nightmares were rare and infrequent, and he didn't have any more flashbacks. Bones still wanted him to go to therapy, and Jim was... starting to consider it.

He was genuinely doing well.

Then Gaila told him she loved him and he couldn't even compute it and he modified the Kobayashi
Maru and they called a hearing over it. And some Vulcan asshole started talking about his dad in front of the entire school, and Jim was just barely constructing his plan for ultimate revenge when they got the distress call.

Spock strangled him. Nero strangled him. Ayel strangled him. By the time Jim got to medbay at the end of the universe's longest day, his neck was solid sheath of bruising to reflect the fact that he had instilled murderous rage in not one, not two, but three Vulcans that day.

That had to be some sort of a record.

Bones barely spared him a glance when he walked in, already resetting his tricorder to human-normal. "On the biobed, now," he said.

"You can't give me orders," he said as he hopped up and sat still to be examined. "I'm the captain. I outrank you."

"Not in here, you don't."

Bones glared at the damage to his neck as if it had personally affronted him. "You could stand to be a bit more careful, you know."

"I was careful!"

"I'd love to see your idea of reckless."

Jim huffed and folded his arms. Bones fussed with the dermal regenerator, having him turn around so he could reach his entire neck.

"How are the Vulcan refugees doing?" he asked.

"Doctor-patient confidentiality, kid."

"I don't need specific details or any personal info. I'm just an honest captain asking my CMO for a report, which I am fully allowed to do, by the way."

"Physically, they're fine. Psionically, they're in deep shit. You know how Vulcans have bonds?"

Jim nodded.

"Yeah, well basically what happens is this: Vulcan A is bonded to ten people. One of those is Vulcan B, who is also bonded to ten people. Vulcan A can get faint impressions from Vulcan B's mind, and Vulcan B is getting those same impressions from every single person they're bonded to. There are degrees of separation, obviously, it's not like they have a hive mind. But what this basically adds up to is the entire Vulcan race being interconnected to each other telepathically. They call this great big web of bonds the k'war'ma'khon. And today Nero took the k'war'ma'khon and smashed it with a rock."

"Are they gonna be okay? Do you-- do you think they're gonna go extinct because of this?"

Bones shook his head. "I can't say. Those who were closer to Vulcan are going to be handling it worse than the others, though. Apparently... um, the planet let out a psychic death cry. From what the Vulcans have told me, I'm guessing that was... traumatic."

"I want you to give Spock a full examination after you're done with me."
He nodded. "Already planning on it, kid."

"Alright, Spock, you check out physically-- for the most part. Your brain chemistry's a little funny, but that's to be expected. Now, I'm just gonna ask you some questions, okay? How many bonds did you lose today?"

"Solely my mother's."

"Okay. And how many do you have left?"

"One."

McCoy froze. "What?"

"I have one bond remaining."

"But you only lost one today."

"Correct."

"Don't Vulcans typically have big families? Y'know, so that they can have a ton of bonds?"

"Indeed."

"Okay. Uh, care to explain?"

"I fail to see how it is your business."

"It's medically relevant. It's fucking dangerous for you to only have one bond, Spock, what if it breaks? What if it's unstable or unhealthy or something? Your hold to sanity is essentially riding on your relationship with one single person. I absolutely have to evaluate that."

"Very well," he said. "My remaining bond is to my adopted sister, Michael. Or relationship is adequate. I have no reason to believe she would sever the bond."

"...You don't have a bond with your dad?"

"Negative. He elected to refrain from engaging with me telepathically in any manner due to my hybrid status. There is an 86% chance that my genetic code will begin to spontaneously unravel one day and result in my death. He lost three infants to this prior to my birth. He is... cautious, around me."

"And you didn't have any other siblings?"

"My family is admittedly small by Vulcan standards. I had a half-brother as well, but our bond was broken many years ago."

"What about friends as close as family? Do you have any bonds with any of them?"

"I have no such relationships, Doctor."

He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Do you have a betrothal bond with Uhura?"

"Negative."

"Do you plan on making one any time soon?"
"We have not discussed it."

"Okay, well my official medical opinion is that you need to make some friends, Spock, and also talk to your girlfriend about moving forward. You realize you come from a social species, don't you? I don't care how unemotional Vulcans; telepaths need connections. Goddammit," he said. "I really hate to say this, but just because your sister won't break the bond doesn't mean it can't get broken accidentally. Please tell me she's sitting somewhere safe on Earth nowhere near any malicious aliens or anything."

"My sister is an officer in Starfleet, currently posted on board a starship."

"Of course she is," McCoy said. "Go meditate or something. Just-- just get out of my medbay and go sit quietly somewhere safe, okay? And if you get injured any time in the next twelve hours, I swear to god, I will kill you myself."

Spock nodded curtly and hopped off the biobed. McCoy shook his head, muttering to himself. That one was going to be as bad as Jim, if not worse, he could tell.
Jim has completely logical, justified reasons for being wary of Sulu.

The facts:

- Sulu could totally kick his if he wanted. Jim knows from their sparring that he could probably take him in hand-to-hand, but the guy owns a fucking katana, and fist versus katana? *Katana always wins.*
- Jim and Sulu slept together that one time at the Academy and Jim let Sulu hold him down, call him names, and spank him, in addition to a general... roughness. Now, Jim would never have been embarrassed about any of that in a million years-- had their relationship remained strictly confined to sex. But now Sulu's his helmsman and he has to look him in the eye and give him orders every day. It feels weird and charged and generally wrong. Jim is *sure* that Uhura has noticed.
- That oh-so-regrettable one night stand ended in Sulu offering to make breakfast the next morning and Jim having a panic attack because of it. Then Sulu had to comm Bones to drag Jim back to their dorm room and calm him down. God knows what he thinks that was about.

And see, all of those are incredibly valid reasons on Jim's part. He doesn't think anyone could fault him for his current behavior. And really, a little paranoid avoidance is good for the soul.

Unfortunately, Sulu doesn't seem to agree.

He shows up outside Jim's quarters one day, looking awkward, but not half as awkward or panicked as Jim feels.

"Hey man," he says. "Do we need to like, talk or something?"

"Uhh," Jim says. "No. No, I don't think so."

"We need to talk," Sulu says, pushing inside of Jim's quarters. He feels new, fresh panic spike through him. "So you've been avoiding me."

"No I haven't."

"And, like, normally I wouldn't care, you do you man, but you're my captain and this is getting out of control."

"No it isn't."

"Today, you refused to give me orders. You had Yeoman Rand pass me notes about course changes three times."

"There was nothing unusual about that. The bridge was really peaceful, and I didn't want to disturb that by yelling."

"Dude, the crew had an hour and a half long discussion about corn."

"That was part of the peace."

"Okay, just... This needs to stop," Sulu said. "And I have an idea."

Jim waited.
"We should just start sleeping with each other."

Jim perked up instantly, but resolved to hide it. "I'm listening," he said.

"Okay. See, like, the whole us sleeping together thing, that wasn't awkward. But then you made it awkward."

"I did not."

Sulu ignored that. "So I propose we make it be normal. If we have sex all the time and that's just a fact of life, then there's no reason for anything to be weird between us."

Jim considered that. Technically, Starfleet permitted... stuff, between officers within two ranks of each other, as long as they filled out the whole 'we definitely consent to this' forms with Command. But Jim had generally felt super skeevy about that and hadn't even considered it. But Sulu, Sulu hadn't known him as just his captain. He had first met him when they were both lowly cadets of the same rank and he had agreed to sleep with him then. And Jim knew exactly what he expected out of this: not romance, not personal favors, this wasn't even an attempt to sleep his way to the top. He just honestly wanted a better working relationship between them and some simple, honest normalcy on the bridge. In fact, the ideas of romance or favoritism would actually go against that, would be the opposite of what he wanted.

Jim had just found the perfect person on board to have no strings attached sex with.

"Sulu," he said. "You're a goddamn genius."

The other man grinned and closed in on him.

Their arrangement was simple. No actual sleeping together. Sulu's quarter's always, so Jim could leave when he wanted and wouldn't be tempted to stay. They would both also sleep with whoever else they wanted, but Jim was pretty sure that neither of them had actually had an opportunity to make use of that clause yet. They would not, under any circumstances, talk about anything deep or emotional. By unspoken agreement, Jim's panic attack back at the Academy had never happened.

And after shift, once the doors close behind them, their roles from earlier in the day reverse and Sulu is in command, he gives all the orders. They both find the change refreshing.

Their safe word is oleander, which means 'caution' in flower language. Turns out Sulu is a big fat nerd. Jim had never seen it coming.

About a month in, they add a new rule where the words 'dude' and 'bro' are officially banned once physical contact is initiated, due to their mood-killing effects.

When they aren't in Sulu's quarters, things are normal, just like he wanted. Jim relaxes around him on the bridge. It gives him an odd sense of security, now, to know what Sulu's like during sex. They begin a tentative friendship. Most of the senior crew takes their meals in the mess together, except for the occasional small group or pair that will splinter off. There's a regular weekly poker game, too. Jim and Sulu both show up and socialize amiably, joking around, even if they both refuse to address the other by anything other than their last name.

And sometimes they'll go to the gym and spar together and while Sulu is practically a wall of muscle, he just doesn't have the instincts or vast array of (paranoid) training that Jim does, and so Jim wins nine times out of ten and whips him into a frustrated mess and then Sulu drags him back to his quarters and fucks him into the mattress.
It works, Jim thinks. For them, it works.

Precisely thirteen and a half years ago, the citizens of Tarsus IV revolted. They stormed the gubernatorial palace as an angry mob, overwhelming the guards with sheer numbers and carrying off Kodos, cursing and spitting and tied up like an animal.

They march him over to the food storage warehouse. It's unattended, the guards are nowhere in sight. Kodos feels blinding rage streak through. He'll have them killed for this.

If he lives long enough, that is.

The crowd murmurs in consternation, then eventually two people step forward, going up to the control panel and attempting to hack through it. There are muffled thumps and banging and cursing coming from inside the warehouse, the sound of the occasional slap and deep voices barking things that can't quite be made out through the door. Five minutes after the mob's arrival, the door opens from the inside, to reveal both guards and a child laden down with two massive feed bags filled to the brim with food.

James. The child is James, Kodos's former protege. He's grown, he must be fifteen by now. Kodos should have known someone like him would refuse to die.

And two years after he was supposed to have been executed, he's still causing trouble, despite Kodos's best efforts.

The crowd is instantly enraged, of course, because what else could they be? They shout and storm the warehouse and forget about Kodos entirely. He writhes out of the ropes he was tied with--these people clearly had no clue what they were doing.

The warehouse is on fire, doomed to go up in smoke and take all the food with it. People are carrying out what they can, others still foraging and sealing their death sentence doing so, and some are running back to the colony main but others are taking off into the woods.

After James. The brat has lost his bags, but somehow acquired new boxes of food.

A slow-burning rage heats his chest and he follows too. It's not long before he hears children yelling, and heads towards that sound, away from the wild goose chase James is sure to lead the others on.

The kids start running after their apparent leader, and Kodos is awed at their stupidity. He's trying to save them, and they're determined to get themselves killed.

“No! Turn back! Don’t follow me!” James calls, and Kodos sees why he's the leader: he's the only one with any sense.

“Fuck you, JT!” a girl yells. She’s holding a baby that's yelling to shake the heavens. The rest of their little camp has already run off, except for her and one older boy.

"You stay here with Lenore, I'll go after him," the boy says, quiet enough that Kodos would have missed it had he not been so close.

"No!" she hisses, but the boy is already gone, leaving her with the baby, with Lenore.

The forest has caught fire around them, smoke filling the air and choking every living thing. Kodos is stumbling forward still, near blind with it. The girl has collapsed to the ground, coughing, unable
to even stand on her one remaining leg. She's covered in soot and ash, Kodos sees, staining orange hair black and letting her tears leave clear tracks down her cheeks.

He picks up a rock--

James is there, appearing out of nowhere. The girl is half-unconscious and aware of nothing. He wraps her arm around his shoulders and bears almost all of her weight. They disappear into the smoke together, and even James's coughing fades away.

Kodos stumbles to the ground and collapses heavily.

Why did he come here? Why was killing James and his band of rebels so important? The smoke will take him now, surely, and then the fire will ruin his body until nothing but bones are left.

He realizes he has fallen mere inches from the baby, the abandoned, forgotten baby. Its breaths are coming in rapid wheezes now, incapable of producing sound any longer. The smoke will fill and strangle its tiny lungs far before it kills Kodos.

It's a strange moment, one he'll question later for years to come, but as he lay dying, he wanted one last good act. One more act of sacrifice, of giving of himself for the good of the colony. He's given it so much already, traded away his career, his life, his very soul, whatever was needed to save as many people as possible.

He's going to die anyway. He knows this. So why prolong it for just a few more minutes?

He takes off his shirt, spits on it to wet it, and uses it to cover the baby's face. It will filter as much of the smoke out as possible. Maybe the child will survive. Maybe this measly measure that he could have used for himself will keep the child-- this Lenore-- alive just long enough for someone else to find her.

His vision blurs and blackens, and that's the last thought he has before passing out.

When he wakes up, the smoke has cleared and Lenore is still breathing. He feels a thrill of hope in his heart.

There's no one else around and he picks up the baby gently. She gurgles happily, tiny fists flailing in his direction.

Perhaps this is a blessing, a reward. A sign of some sort. The one good, shining thing to come out of so much death and tragedy. Perhaps Lenore is his second chance to do good in the universe.

"I will take care of you, Lenore," he says. "I will raise you as my daughter and you will be untouched by all of this. You will be my redemption. Lenore... Karidian."

He smiled down at her, and the baby smiled back up at him, utterly innocent and so completely unaware of what was happening.
Kevin

Kevin was seventeen. He was the Enterprise's youngest crewmember, two months younger than Chekov. He was a nice young communications ensign who thought Uhura held the sun, as did most communications ensigns.

He speaks six languages and counting. Despite communications being a division of ops, he's technically command track, because a few decades from now, he wants to have his own ship to sail the stars and save lives and planets with.

Jim has the utmost faith in him.

That said, he sat him down for an awkward, painful conversation almost as soon as they left spacedock.

"The crew doesn't know I was on Tarsus," he said. "Only the CMO, Dr. McCoy, does."

"I haven't told anyone either," he said. "Starfleet was a fresh start for me. I heard about their early admittance program and well, anything's better than aging out in the system, right?"

He gave a weak, wry smile. It mostly looked broken to Jim.

"I'm sorry, Kev."

"Don't be," he said. "You did everything you could. You kept me alive. All the foster families I had, they were just... The good ones were okay. They were all just pit stops, though. You were the closest thing I ever had to a parent. I don't even remember my biological parents."

Jim winced. "You deserve a lot better than..."

"Than a starship captain?"

Than a homeless prostitute, Jim had been about to say, even though that hadn't been his situation for years now. Three, to be precise. But maybe subconsciously, he was still stuck in that mindset, still living meal to meal and using sex to get there.

He gave a false grin. "You know what I mean. I'm not exactly a model citizen. I'm not Tom."

And that earned a laugh, so it was worth it.

Jim sobered then. "But really, Kevin. I'm sorry I wasn't there for you more. You deserved some stability in your life. If not with me, then at least with better foster parents, and I'm sorry you didn't have that."

Kevin shifted awkwardly, kicking at the ground a bit. "It's fine," he said stiffly. "You did what you could. It's not like I was miserable, and I told you I didn't need 'rescued' or whatever."

He slung an arm around his shoulders. "Too bad. Rescued you anyway. Now we're going to go on space adventures together and you're gonna live your dream."

Kevin snorted, but snuggled closer into Jim's side nonetheless.

Bones slammed his tray down next to Spock in the mess hall, disrupting his perfectly pleasant
lunch with Nyota.

"...Can I help you, Doctor?" Spock asked.

"Nah, I'm good," he said, digging into his meal.

"What do you want, Leonard?" Nyota asked flatly.

"Spock here doesn't have enough bonds."

"Doctor--"

"What does that mean?"

"And bonds are absolutely vital for Vulcan mental stability. So I'm 'onna force him to form one of those familial/friendship bonds with me, and also I'm gonna harass him about gettin' on with proposing to you."

"What?!!"

Bones grinned and pointed a fork at Spock's tray. "Eat up, buddy."

Lenore Karidian was five-ish months old when Jim Kirk took her back to the camp. Previously, her name had been Emma Cairn.

She was twenty-two months old when rescue came for her and her new father out in the woods, and the USS Newton took both Karidians safely to Earth. Anton got fake papers around for them both, creating their identities, and then they took a shuttle bound for Andor and settled in to metropolitan life.

Lenore was four years old when she asked why she didn't have a mother like the other kids. Anton told her she had died on a distant colony planet, where they used to live before, but she must not tell anyone that. She was an orphan. Anton had adopted her out of the sheer goodness of his heart, because he loved her very much.

She beamed.

She was six when she accidentally slipped up and told a classmate about her mother. So as not to arouse suspicions, Anton waited three months before moving his little family to Regulus VII.

He made sure Lenore was perfectly aware of exactly why they were moving away from their home and all her friends.

They spent eight miserable months on Regulus VII before moving again, for the sake of both of their sanity. They went to the Venus stations, great dome cities built for scientific research more than anything. But they did require entertainment, and so there were non-scientific jobs available--restaurants, bars, clothing stores.

There was a theater and the troupe took a shine to Lenore and her father, especially when he proved his skill. He was offered a job, warned that it would require constant travel, and readily accepted.

Lenore was eight when she began receiving acting lessons and helping out with the productions. She became a very proficient child actress.

She was ten the first time she performed the role of Juliet and made audience members cry.
She was thirteen when Vulcan was destroyed and Nero was killed and James Tiberius Kirk was named captain of the Enterprise. Her father watched the news with grim features and a pale face. When he finally unfroze, he stood and started pacing the room anxiously, muttering to himself, to Lenore, and it seemed very much like he couldn't stop.

He asked if she remembered him telling her about her mother. He told her that that colony planet he had mentioned so long ago had been Tarsus IV, and that he had ruled it absolutely, a benevolent king more than a governor. He told her about the famine and his desperation and his will to do what was right and save as many lives as possible. How there were five years left before the next in-person check-up. How the ion cloud and the distance made subspace communication impossible. How he had thrown his heart and soul into saving the world of Tarsus IV, and it all would have worked too, but then the damn ships came early.

How there were nine dangerous individuals out there who could ruin his and Lenore's life, say a single sentence and get Anton thrown in a maximum security prison for the rest of his life, get Lenore taken away from her only family in the world and placed in foster care. He spat the phrase like it was a horror story in itself, like it spoke volumes, and Lenore flinched.

She didn't sleep at all that night. Her performance suffered the next day, but then, so did Anton's.

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