Summary

Talia Hale would have and could have faced anything – the collapse of the stock market, invasion of the Canadians, earthquakes, tsunamis, a comet falling from the sky… any goddamn thing.

In the end, Fate gave them the living dead.

What a bitch.
A Guide to Post-Apocalyptic Regime-Building

Chapter Notes

I started writing this last February, after I watched ‘Pride, Prejudice, and Zombies’ on TV. I’ve always wanted to write a zombie fic, so this is definitely a tick on my bucket list. I abandoned this story for a bit, then got back to it after I got inspired and finally decided on a direction I wanted to go. I write a little slow, but knowing the end game will help move stuff along.

My master list of references for this fic is still pretty messy, but I will post it either at the end notes or by the end of the fic. I did some research and was inspired by a lot of the stuff I read, but don’t quote me on any accuracies. This is all a work of fiction – a survival story with a dash of fictional apocalyptic regime-building and probably a smidge of crack. *shrugs* I don’t even know. And my tags are a mess. I’m usually so diligent with them, but when someone says zombie apocalypse, you kinda already get the gist of it, you know?

I accept comments, kudos, and brains as expressions of appreciation.

Enjoy.

The Hale Family was old money. It was a fact. The intelligence, craftiness, and good luck of their ancestors bore fruit and led to the fortunate, wealthy, and secure futures of all the Hale children born after.

It was an honor and a gift Talia had never wasted. She was born with her tiny feet already in the door to the riches and privileges the world could offer, and she was not going to squander even a single opportunity to make use of it.

It was probably why, among her generation of Hales, Talia was the most successful in keeping a hold of her fortune and cultivating it into an empire of her own design. It was a bit of a shame really, and a god awful waste. She could have used a cousin, or a nephew, or a niece, or so, to advance her domain and influence even further, but most of them were far too dull and lacking in ambition for her to even consider wasting her time and resources on them. She was born to the main branch of the Hale family. It was no skin off her back to cut off all ties with the far-flung, low-hanging branches, which she did, and without remorse.

At least Talia had her younger brother Peter. His playboy tendencies left much to be desired, but he too knew better than to be wasteful or to allow anything to tarnish their reputation and risk their fortune. So she allowed him his indulgences. Just because he employed different methods didn’t mean they didn’t work. (They worked, sometimes too well.)

Talia and Peter Hale spent the better part of their lives nurturing their ambitions and furthering their goals. Peter never married, but Talia did and, despite the hearsay, she was fortunate enough to marry for both love and business. Desmond Trion was exceedingly wealthy, but he was also a good, practical man. Most of all, he was certainly no fool. He knew what marrying Talia entailed, and he had no qualms with it. Their plans aligned quite well that way.
(Desmond changed his last name to Hale the moment they were wed, and if that wasn’t true love, Talia didn’t know what was.)

They were blessed with seven beautiful children – Matthew, charming and strong; Valerie, intelligent and ruthless; Laura, fierce-tempered and brave; Derek, sensitive and kind; twins Camera and Cora, both mischievous and artistic; and their youngest, Nathaniel, sweet and cunning.

Peter was as he always was, a lothario that had men and women eating out of the palm of his hand, and loyal to the family and their cause, with the kind of mercilessness Talia loved. If only he wasn’t too keen on sharing his techniques and skill set with some of her children, but ah well. Peter loved them all fiercely. There was nothing else Talia could ask for.

So Talia had it all: more money than she knew what to do with, queen of an empire that had the potential to control the entire country, and a family just as dedicated to furthering their family’s cause and influence…

But Fate tossed all of her hard work into the deep end.

Talia would have and could have faced anything – the collapse of the stock market, invasion of the Canadians, earthquakes, tsunamis, a comet falling from the sky… any goddamn thing.

In the end, Fate gave them the living dead.

What a bitch.

Fortunately, Talia and Peter were nothing if not planners, and Talia didn’t marry Desmond just for his bank account or the fact that he was perfectly happy whether Talia made him look after their seven children at home or use his deceivingly jolly nature at a business meeting to net them a couple more billions in the bank.

The moment the whole world went to shit, Talia ensured that her family had the means, resources, and skills to survive what the media are calling ‘the collapse of the human race.’

Such an overdramatic notion, but it got the job done – mainly to cause widespread panic.

Honestly. People were dumb.

Since the supposed ‘end of the world’ was already at their doorstep via the undead, Talia felt it safe to facepalm at the unprepared. It wasn’t as if the whole thing came out of nowhere. By god, reports had been appearing nonstop on every news channel in every country months before the attacks hit an all time high. Talia blamed the news. At first they didn’t want to call it what it obviously was, more scared of being laughed at than reporting the facts. But when some kid on Youtube finally broke the z-word – zombie, zombie, ZOMBIEESSSSSSS! – then suddenly that’s all everyone was saying.

If the masses were still caught off guard after that and waited until the zombies were literally already knocking at their doors, then they sure as fucking hell deserved getting bitten and eaten alive. But that was just for the dumb and dumber ones. The general human race still managed to hold on to a certain modicum of common sense.

Besides, there were a few consolations. Fate seemed to have taken a tip from the world’s zombie obsession and resolved to make them a somewhat manageable adversary, if also numerous and annoying.

Oh, zombies still had a hankering for human flesh, but in the time between being bitten and being
taken over the infection, zombies could be surprisingly civil and held quite enlightening conversations. They also retained their personalities, thoughts, and memories. Very few people seemed to have figured that out, but Talia wasn’t surprised. Most people would find it off-putting to have a bleeding, half-eaten man minutes away from dying and becoming obsessed with their flesh to talk to them about the weather, or their dead cat, or somesuch. But Talia could deal. She had conversed with far more disgusting and frankly mind-numbing people back when the world made sense. She could handle talking to a bleeding man with his stomach ripped open, guts spilling out and slowly writhing closer to her designer boots.

Anyway, during that ‘grace period,’ zombies were still relatively human. The panic was what hastened the zombification process and made them madder when they finally succumbed to the bite. And frankly, it was much easier to kill them when they were calmer.

And thank god they moved like normal humans and not like that terrifying movie with the fast-moving zombies that moved like a swarm. Nathaniel had shown it to Talia once and, while she loved her youngest, she was tempted to smack him to the next state.

Anyway, it had been more than two years since the whole mess began and Talia just wanted the entire world to implode.

She prayed for it every night, but by the time morning came nothing happened, and so Talia still thought Fate was a bitch.

“Think of it this way, my love: we always said we wanted to take the kids on a road trip,” Desmond said pleasantly, bobbing his head to the music as he drove.

Talia almost thought of kicking the dash in a display of petulance, but that was far beneath her. She settled for pouting and glaring at the passing scenery. Desmond guided the RV down the highway at a fair pace. They would have gone faster, but there were a handful of zombies and abandoned vehicles littering the road. They had to wait for Peter and the children to clear out a path before they could progress.

“Stupid zombies,” she muttered, as she saw Valerie lean out of the Camaro with her Glock and fire a shot clean through an approaching zombie’s forehead. She could almost hear her oldest daughter’s tirade at getting zombie guts on the car. She had always hated messes.

“And in hindsight,” Desmond added, “We really have to thank Peter for this. He was the one who insisted that we teach the kids how to fire a gun.”

“Because Hales eventually get kidnapped, yes I know.” Talia rolled her eyes. “I didn’t think this would be how they were going to use it.”

Desmond shrugged. “For all you’ve been calling Fate and Mother Nature bitches, love, I still say we’ve got a couple strokes of good fortune, still a lot of things to be thankful for.”

Talia sighed and grabbed her tablet. “You know, my love, it’s probably your positive demeanor that hasn’t killed me all these years. Karma is the third bitch in the ballpark, but your goodness is
what’s probably keeping my karmic levels in check. With you around, things don’t seem quite so annoying and the urge to kill someone always passes faster.”

“I love you too,” Desmond tossed out, always so casual with affection. “But don’t call me good; how insulting.”

“Would you prefer insane, my love?” Talia asked, fingers swiping through the tablet screen and checking the map and timeline.

Desmond shrugged. “I married you, didn’t I?”

“Yes, you did.” She held out a fist, pleased when her husband immediately bumped his fist against her. In another world, another time, she wouldn’t even act as such. It seemed this entire situation brought out the childishness in her.

This entire situation could kiss its own ass.

Talia checked her watch and the landscape outside. She glanced at the rearview mirror, pleased to see the black SUV and the forest green jeep wrangler behind them.

They had six vehicles in their procession, which contained all their most important possessions and their supplies.

Peter was first in line with his military bike. The bike was previously owned by Hector Mercier, a businessman Peter had met at a soiree when he was twenty-one and had been on-and-off with for three goddamn decades. Talia adored Hector and she actually thought he and Peter might settle down together for real, but… ah well, Peter could tell the story on his own time.

Anyway, after the zombies came a-moaning, Peter claimed the bike would be useful and it was, if also somewhat impractical, but they all knew that a) the bike had its own sentimental value and that b) it was inspired by that appallingly scruffy, crossbow-wielding guy on that zombie show. At least Peter made the whole getup look miles better than some of the other motorcycle-riding, bow-wielding people they’d met on the road, because Peter preferred guns and had incredible hygiene, apocalypse notwithstanding. (Seriously, didn’t that Darren guy ever take a bath or wiped himself down or trimmed his hair? Bad enough his fans seemed to follow that example post-apocalypse.)

Second in line was Matthew in the red SUV, which came equipped with a remote-controlled machine gun and a barrage of ammo. Matthew inherited his stocky stature from Desmond, and his subtlety from… well, let’s just say the subtlety probably skipped her eldest son. He was strong though, with an air of leadership and a head for strategy, and provided most of the muscle needed.

Valerie and Nathan were next in the black Camaro. Valerie was the most intelligent and diplomatic of the children, and had always had the best instincts both for business and for zombie herds. Nathan was only sixteen, but he was good at navigation and scavenging, and his love for zombies and disaster and apocalyptic movies had helped them more times than they could have expected.

Talia was immensely torn between being glad and being incredibly pained that her children’s talents applied post-zombie apocalypse.

The modified RV was next, driven by Desmond; rarely Talia, because she absolutely hated driving. The RV served as a portable home and shelter, and also served as transport and a veritable wall of defense.

Laura and Derek drove their strongest and most secure vehicle, a fully armored black SUV. It contained supplies, rations, documents, medicine, money, and the most important being Talia’s
grandchildren, Matthew’s three-year-old daughter CC, and Valerie’s two-year-old son Spencer. Laura was their best and fastest driver, while Derek was the kindest and steadiest of them, good for protecting and looking after the children.

(Matthew’s late girlfriend had passed from childbirth, which was partly a blessing. Talia found her… acceptable, but she had always been too sickly and it wouldn’t have helped at all when they were running after zombies. Valerie’s late boyfriend was bitten right after Valerie shot him in the leg for trying to run away like a coward. Talia wondered what she even saw in that man in the first place, but at least they got his SUV, money, and a couple of supplies out of him. In Desmond’s opinion, she used him mostly for the genes. That man was tall and had quite beautiful eyes, the latter of which Spencer had inherited. Talia thought he was probably right.

Maybe it said something about what kind of mother she was that she was pleased her children were unattached by the time the zombies came rolling in, but she didn’t really care what other people thought of her. She hated excess baggage.)

The twins, Cora and Cameron, and the jeep wrangler brought up the rear. They had the sharpest eyes, were the best shooters, and watched the group’s backs. They also had a tendency to be trigger happy, so Talia preferred they covered the SUV and the grandchildren.

Talia was cut off from her musings when her phone beeped in alarm. It was time for their hourly check-in.

Desmond turned off the music and turned up the volume on their communicator radio. It was a cacophony of noises, but they kept their radios on at all times. A little noise was better than total silence.

“Check in,” Talia said.

“I’m good,” Nathan said. “Bored.”

“Cam looks about three seconds from tossing his Nintendo 3DS out the window, so I’m checking in for the both of us,” Cora said. There was the sound of swearing and video games in the background.

“Cool the video game, Cameron,” Desmond said. He paused. “But if you’re going to throw something, make sure it’s not at your sister or any of the vehicles.” He glanced at Talia. The twins had always had a bit of a temper, but where Cora was expressive, Cameron tended to hold it all in until he exploded.

Derek spoke up, soft and calm. “I’m here with CC and Spencer.”

“I’m alive too, might need to pee soon though,” Laura commented.

“We have no problem here up front, and we only have a few zombies around,” Valerie spoke up.

“No herd as far as I can see,” Matthew spoke up. “So we’re lucky.”

“Feeling alive, and somewhat peckish,” Peter commented, voice muffled by his helmet.

“Mom and Dad are fine, and we can make camp soon, let’s check,” Desmond said.

Derek’s soft voice came in, a little faded. “Say hi to Gigi and Popo and your mom and dad?”

In the background, they could hear what sounded like Disney’s Little Einstein. Spencer loved it
and CC loved indulging her baby cousin, even though she always said that it was for babies and not big girls like her.

There was a shrill “Hiii! Daddy! Gigi! Popo!” from CC, and Spencer’s soft “Mama?” CC took after Laura and her father Matthew’s loudness and rambunctiousness, but Spencer took after Derek and his mother Valerie’s calmer countenance.

“Hiii, baby girl,” Matthew called out. Girlish giggles greeted him.

“I’m here, baby,” Valerie called out to her son.

“Sleepy, wanna sleep,” Spencer said, the makings of a tantrum already evident in his voice.

“Do you want to sleep with Uncle Derek or wait for me?” Valerie asked.

There was a shuffle and a humming sound, before Spencer’s voice came on. “Gigi and Popo.”

Talia couldn’t resist. “Ten minutes, baby. Okay?”

“Oh-tay.” Spencer sounded too sleepy to last, but he also inherited the Hale stubbornness, so Talia’s not banking on that.

Talia checked the map they had been following for nearly three months now.

“We’ll take a ten in ten break,” Talia said. “Eat something, go to the bathroom, and stretch our legs. We’ll switch Spencer to the RV before we move on. Nathaniel, give me a rundown please.”

Nathan’s voice came on, probably studying the map like Talia was. “We’ll cross the forest line in about three and a half hours. Not sure what’s the zombie situation there, but it’s still a pretty low-risk spot if we choose to make camp there, lots of cover but still have access to the highway. As for our destination, we’re about a day and a half away, two days tops pending any resistance.”

“Good,” Talia said. “That gives us time to regroup. We don’t know until where the Hills had expanded their territory so we can’t be hasty and trespass before we’re ready.”

“That settles it then,” Desmond said, making the final decision. “Ten in ten break, then we’ll push on until we can make camp. We’ll discuss our stopover route and plan of attack later tonight. You guys know what to do. Nat, Valerie, the campsite is your call.”

There were sounds of affirmation all around. In the distance, they heard the sound of gunshots, saw Peter make a loop between the red SUV and the Camaro and then shoot two zombies in the head that were shuffling along the road.

Talia rubbed her temples with both hands and leaned back on her seat.

Fucking zombies.
Mieczyslaw ‘Stiles’ Stilinski was a paranoid little shit, constantly in a state of anxiousness, hyperactivity, and laughed at everything, even – or rather, *always* – at the gross and inappropriate. He was talkative, with a propensity for sarcasm, and he was intelligent, always with his head in a book or on the fifty-plus tabs on his computer and, okay, fine, he also had a thing for trawling through the unknown corners of both the physical world and the online world on a fascinating search for the illegal, the suspicious, and the morbid.

But hey! Don’t go calling him some kinky, psychopathic motherfucker – though, all right, full disclosure, he might have a healthy appreciation for BDSM, in theory at least, but not in practice – but in his defense, Stiles had always been in a constant state of survival.

He had to be.

See, kids sucked. They were petty and mean, flocking together like sheep, all easily influenced and compliant to whatever lies and rumors bullies spread. And someone like Stiles – a spastic, twitchy, skinny kid with ADHD and a big mouth who was too intelligent for his own good and had a father who had a rising career in law enforcement…

Stiles was a prime target.

John, his father, tried. He tried rallying the Deputies to look after his son, then started cracking down on the bullies he caught. He taught Stiles the better part of firearms and self-defense and manual labor, how to channel his frustrations and manic energy to something more zen, more productive, more unobtrusive. But while he was well-meaning, he was often too busy, didn’t have time, and didn’t always understand Stiles very well.

You could imagine how worse it got when John became the Sheriff of their fair town.

Claudia, his mother, was a librarian by heart who was well-known and well-thought of around town. She wasn’t born in Beacon Hills like most of the other residents, so she could understand an odd duckling like Stiles. Really, Stiles could go on and on about her but ah, there would be more times to do so – provided nobody around here got zombiefied before he could tell the story.

Anyway, Claudia knew the potential for destruction and pain that brewed in every child, and she knew that kids were sneaky and knew how to hide secrets better than adults. So while John tried prevention, she would rather nurture.

With his mother’s teachings and his father’s resources, Stiles grew to understand that while the brain was mightier than the brawn, ideas would remain only thusly if there were no hands to work on them. So Stiles grew to love researching and experimenting, getting his hands dirty, snooping around.

Stiles only had two goals: to ensure his survival and to feed his perpetually buzzing and curious brain.

See, his parents’ combined good standing in town didn’t really help Stiles deal with the younger crowd, but the elders of Beacon loved him.

The older folks liked funneling his hyperactivity, intelligence, and weirdness into the occasional chores or favors to keep him away from trouble. They liked having an audience to tell their bizarre war stories, teachings, conspiracy theories, or secrets to. Those lonely oldies liked helping raise the kid who was too smart and sarcastic for his own good, who would pick fights despite knowing he’d get beaten to a pulp, the little rebel child that could.
And Stiles realized soon enough that here at fair Beacon, the elders’ words were law. They were mothers, fathers, grandmothers, grandfathers, mentors, leaders, founders. They were the patriarchs and matriarchs of the town. Their words were law.

They were forgotten.

And Stiles might be weird, but he was really friendly.

You know what they say: Anybody who wanted to win a war had to learn how to play dirty.

Thanks to the tutelage of the learned and experienced, Stiles started to understand his town, its history and secrets. He learned the government, the law, the businesses, the corporations, and the charities. He learned practically every shortcut, hiding place, back road, and alley in town and learned how to navigate the Preserve like the back of his own hand. He became familiar with every address, street, building, and business. He started studying people, the eldest, the most powerful, and the most influential. He became a spectator, if not a part, of even the dark, seedy, illegal, underbelly of his fair town.

High school became something of a game to him. Bullies might be knocking him about and red-haired geniuses might be looking through him, but he knew it was all a matter of time.

Anybody who wanted to win a war had to learn how to be patient.

Then, Fate gave them zombies.

Fate had a damn good sense of humor.

Once zombies came to life (or not-life, as it were) and brains started becoming a hot commodity, Stiles felt a lot calmer and more excited than he had ever been in his entire life.

Now, in a world where the undead were walking, Stiles’ once-insufferable disposition and odd hobbies became his biggest asset – his research and experiments, his smart mouth, his brain, sharp instincts, and his well of knowledge, not to mention all the lessons on weapons and self defense that trained him for more than just being some wanna-be high school lacrosse player.

Most importantly, while the teenagers of his town turned him into a social pariah, Stiles’ good standing with those in power made sure he was taken seriously.

Because here’s the thing, Stiles also knew one other thing about himself: he was pretty fucking loyal.

So yeah, maybe he hated half the goddamn idiots that made up this town, loathed the bullshit social hierarchy of his high school, utterly despised some of the soul-suckers that were milking his fair town and corrupting its spirit.

Yeah, maybe he would rather sacrifice Jackson Whittemore to a zombie horde (but the guy was a surprisingly useful minion – all right, fine, Lydia – ally so maybe Stiles didn’t mind him too
But Beacon Hills was his home, and there were people that made it worthwhile, like his Dad, the Deputies, the Mc Calls, Lydia, Danny, the Argents, the Yukimuras, the town’s oldies and the drag queens.

And Beacon Hills was where Stiles lost his mother during that freak attack back in the infant stages of the zombie infestation.

So he shed off all that hangdog, desperate-to-please, scared shitless, dorky persona and came out on the other side with a trusty jeep full of weapons, an aluminum baseball bat strapped to his back, and a game plan that became their Bible of Survival.

Fact was, Stiles Stilinski saved the whole goddamn town of Beacon Hills.

That shit deserved an award.

It was six-twelve on the dot that morning when Stiles signed out of his post on Hedge-8. The past evening had been quiet, no zombie activity save for a few stragglers they spotted forty meters away headed in the opposite direction. Stiles made a mental note to find out where they could have possibly come from. The Hunters kept their territories zombie-free, and last Stiles heard there was no activity in the southeast. Maybe another hunt was in order.

The Hedge was what they called the walls that surrounded the territory of Beacon Hills. They were two-level barriers – a series of chain-link, steel reinforced fences backed up by a wall made of a mix of stone, concrete, steel, and wood. The fences served as a first line of defense, the walls served as a lookout post for the Crows that guarded the territory, while the space between the fences and walls helped them at ground level.

Numerous Hedges had been erected around town, numbered one to eight from the least to the most vulnerable territories. Hedge-8 guarded the road that led to the main highway to and from town. They had long since torn down the ‘Welcome to Beacon Hills’ sign to dissuade and confuse passersby, smashed parts of the asphalt to discourage them even more, and covered the roads with debris, plants, zombie guts, and all manners of messes to make travel difficult. But there were still the occasional zombies that strayed their way or, even worse, travelers looking for sanctuary.

Zombies were fine, but human survivors were so much worse.

Stiles waved at the others still on duty and descended the access ladder. He shook off the fatigue in his bones and took a swig from the water bottle on his hip, before heading for the guardhouse. It was little more than three-sided plywood walls with rusty, corrugated galvanized sheets for the roof, but it did its job. It was spacious and wide open with two small cots, food, medicine, weapons, supplies and a communicator.

Zane Sanders was in, looking chipper and with a bit more color to his cheeks after the 12-hour break the Sheriff ordered him on after three days straight of manning the Hedge.
Zane was in his late thirties, good-looking with a shock of red hair and tan skin. Zane’s grandmother lived six doors down from the Stilinski house and Stiles used to keep her company a few hours every week. Zane visited town six weeks before the crest of the infestation and, Post-Z, he and his grandmother were among Stiles’ staunchest supporters. Zane eventually became Head of the Crows, the team that guarded all their borders.

“Done for the morning, Stiles?” Zane grinned.

“Think I’ll take a break, Zee,” Stiles said, checking the clock and signing his name on the logbook. “Meetings to attend, people to talk to, rounds to make.”

“A mastermind’s work is never over, after all.” Zane gave him a teasing wink and walked off, a rifle in one hand and waving the other over his shoulder.

Stiles watched him pass through the door on the Hedge wall, probably going to patrol the ground level first before taking a spot up top. He left Zane to it and jogged over to the locker and the bicycle parked to the side. As was habit, Stiles checked that his bike, supplies and weapons weren’t tampered with, changed into a clean shirt and a thick hoodie, and cycled off.

One would think that the collapse of the modern world would mean there were less things to do. But, well, that was the price Stiles paid when he decided to turn his goddamn town into a fortress and decided to be responsible for it.

He took the long route around town, making sure he passed by the hospital and the farm and waved at and greeted all the townsfolk he passed. He was cycling by the local supermarket when he saw a familiar head of crazy hair standing by the side of the road, waving both arms madly in the air.

Stiles skidded to a stop and greeted the man with a grin.

“Morning, Coach. You’re up early.”

Bobby Finstock, former Beacon Hills High School lacrosse coach, peered at him from shifty eyes. He had always been a little weird, but there was a reason he was now their designated Shopkeeper and in charge of their main food supply.

“Every waking hour counts, Bilinski. If I even so much as shut my eyes for longer than an hour, those hooligans are going to creep inside my store and make out with my produce.”

“Make off, Coach, not make out.” Stiles paused. “On second thought, that’s a possibility too. Anyway, you needed me for something?”

Coach did that thing where he tilted the side of his face up like he was trying to stare you down with one eye. It was both disconcerting and hilarious.

“Fishers are talking. We got something making noise far west of the lake. Get your Enforcers on it, Bilinski. Don’t you be letting those somethings creep out my fishers.”

People might say don’t believe in hearsay, and even more might say not to believe the batshit crazy, talkative coach, but Stiles knew better than to let anything small slip.

“Sure thing, Coach. I’ll have the Commander check them out. How are we in terms of supplies?”

Coach scoffed. “You’ll get my inventory when you get it, Bilinski. Greenberg’s working on it, hasn’t slept a wink.”
Stiles shrugged. He knew better than to think he’d get a straight answer. Coach was incredibly secretive of their supplies, all the more to ensure they had enough in stock for emergencies.

“Okay then. And I’ll make sure the lake gets a look at by lunch, Coach.”

“See that you do.” Coach took a step back then glared at him, arms crossed.

That was Stiles’ cue to leave. He waved a hand and cycled off. He arrived at the Ironshoppe a little late and locked his bike into place just as a familiar police cruiser rounded the corner. He waited for his Dad to get out, Jordan Parrish in tow. At least Stiles wasn’t the last to arrive.

“Hey, kiddo.” John jogged up to him and gave him a big bear hug. He looked tired, but that was expected. Sheriff-ing was tiring work pre- and post-Z. Thank god his Dad had a good pool of hard-working Deputies, first in line being Deputy Jordan Parrish.

“Hey, Pops. You doing okay?” Stiles asked. “You need to take a break.”

John let out an inelegant snort. “Says the one who sleeps maybe an hour a night.” He rubbed Stiles’ head fondly. “Don’t worry. I’m taking a 12-hour breather after this meeting. Jordan’s been on my case about it too anyway.”

“Thanks, Jordan,” Stiles said to the good-looking man hovering behind his Dad. “Honestly, he listens to you more than he does me.”

John murmured a denial and hit Stiles on the back of the head. Jordan simply shook his head with a small smile.

“Oh, trust me. He can be stubborn when he wants to be.” Jordan grinned. “But as is logic, we can’t really help the people if we’re not at our best and well-rested.”

(Stiles knew his Dad and Jordan were secretly sweet on each other. He had made a few comments over the past few months that it was the end of the world and he wouldn’t judge two people just getting their rocks off or, in the event that feelings were involved, that he wouldn’t hold it against anybody. So far, neither of them was taking to his none-too-subtle hints. At this rate, he was bound to lose in the betting pool and had to do two delivery shifts for the farm on his bicycle wearing a sundress, Mary Jane heels, and a bonnet.

They were living in what amounted to a post-apocalyptic zombie movie. People had to get their kicks and amuse themselves someway, right?)

The Ironshoppe was an old ironworks factory located at the Beacon Hills industrial district. Stiles had made it a priority to shut it down once the infestation hit two years ago, mainly because it was tantamount to a black hole that gobbled up most of their finite resources and was a cesspool for most of the illegal goings-on in town.

Stiles had to face off against most of the industrialists, investors, and townspeople.

But if Stiles wanted it gone, it happened just so.

Now, they used the place for Stiles’ special debriefs and even more special and sensitive meetings.

“Everyone’s here?” Stiles called out, as they walked in.

“Yes, and you’re late, as always,” Allison answered, a rifle at her back and a mug in hand.
Allison Argent was the best Hunter in town. She was still wearing her gear, a blue aviator jacket, fingerless gloves, and cargo pants. Her usual bow and quiver were gone, but she still had her guns on both thigh holsters. She was danger wrapped up in a smoking hot package.

“Hey, I arrived before Dad did,” Stiles protested, stepping closer. He reached out for the mug.

“He’s a busy man. He’s allowed to be late.” Allison stepped back neatly. “And the coffee is for John, not you.”

Stiles gaped. “I’m a busy man too! And I worked hard! The least you could do is give me coffee!”

“You can get your own. Don’t be lazy.” Allison rolled her eyes. She smiled at John. “How was patrol?”

“It was fine.” John took a sip. “Tastes good. Thank you. Had to break up a few fights, but nothing serious. We’ll give you a rundown later.”

“Oh, sure. Fine. Go. Be kind to the elderly.” Stiles groused as they walked deeper inside. “I get no respect around these parts.”

“You really don’t,” Jordan teased, chuckling.

They walked deeper into the shop and Stiles saw that Allison was right. Everybody else was already present.

The heart of the Ironshoppe had been converted from an open-space workshop into a veritable lair. Tables and workstations were set up with all manners of things piled on them; computers, laptops, books and files, maps, weapons, half-eaten meals, and all other paraphernalia. There was a wall of screens to the left; all manners of notes, photos and papers taped on the wall to the right; and shelves of weapons lined the far wall. It was a controlled chaos though, one that the inhabitants of the shop could navigate. The only place that was kept pristine was the large circular dining table at the very center of the shop, the one where the members gathered.

This was the inner circle. This was Stiles’ chosen.

These people saved the town, or rather the ones Stiles chose to help him.

Stiles sat at his usual seat. His father took the one to his right with Jordan to his right. Allison grabbed hers. Stiles looked around at the seats occupied and the ones still empty.

Maybe he was suited to leading a post-apocalyptic regime. That was food for thought.

“It’s a good morning to still be alive, people. Is tomorrow gonna be different?”
Chapter Summary

The Hales arrive at the Hills, and everyone is shooketh but are trying not to show it.

Chapter Notes

I was really kind of surprised to have written this much for the second chapter and after I edited this I still ended up with 2,000+ words more than the first chapter. Like whuuuuut. And I try to keep Talia’s and Stiles’s parts close in length as much as possible, but I went about 750+ words over in Stiles’s POV. I mostly let the story flow on its own, so let’s see how long the third chapter is going to end up. Talia and Stiles are fun to write and they kind of dictate the story.

I accept comments, kudos, and brains as expressions of appreciation. Enjoy.

The Hale family’s entourage of vehicles emerged from the forest, ending up at a dusty back road wide enough for two lanes that stretched out deep into the line of trees. None of them missed the tire marks on the ground, which Peter pointed out to be a fresh track heading out of town, made probably an hour or less based on his guess. Across from them on the other side of the road was more forest and, as Talia remembered, a lake a kilometer or so away. She wondered if the Hills claimed it as their own. Bodies of water were priced territories nowadays, but all too easily polluted and corrupted if one wasn’t careful.

Small stones crunched lightly under Talia’s boots as she walked around. She took a deep breath, the scent of the forest so strong and so familiar. It reminded her of summers long past, the sound of children’s laughter, the taste of honey and sunflowers, and the vision of long dark hair and beautiful brown eyes.

“Forty minutes tops, if I had to guess,” Valerie said, walking up behind her.

Talia nodded. She felt both excited and oddly melancholic.

There was a reason Talia wanted to go on a road trip with her children. Before.

It wasn’t freedom. Freedom was a concept Talia was intimately familiar with, mainly the fact that it was an unattainable and inconceivable farce. The human race wasn’t meant to be free. If they were, they wouldn’t continue to devise so many ways to label, constrain, and bind themselves to the world, to each other, or to the imagined. That belief was all too true now with zombies knocking on their doors. Even in death, apparently they still had no freedom.

Fuck you, world.

No, Talia did not want to go on a road trip with her children for such a ridiculous notion as freedom.
What Talia wanted was to give her children the feeling of purpose. Because even without an itinerary and simply ambling around wasting money and time, there was always a purpose to traveling. Maybe it wasn’t apparent before the journey was made, or even weeks down the road, or even until the very minute or the very second before they reached the end of the road. But there was always, always a reason the first step was taken and the last step was made.

This journey of theirs started out with a purpose and a plan. Now they were about to reach their destination, and it felt a bit bittersweet. Another chapter done and more to write.

But there was history to be made, and Talia never backed down from a challenge.

(Talia had always loved history, especially Hale history. It was a story of winners and survivors.)

“Mother?”

Valerie probably thought Talia was deep in thought of her plans, and not ruminating in the sentimental.

Another reason Talia really fucking hated zombies. These pests were turning her into a sentimental fool.

She had almost reached Desmond’s quota in how many times she should curse zombies in a day, and it was only a little past ten in the morning. How quaint.

Talia waved a hand, both at her daughter and her errant thoughts. “You know the plan, Valerie. Your father and I go first with the RV, then Matthew in the red SUV. You come third. Have Nathan move to the jeep wrangler with the twins. The jeep and Peter will park a few meters from the Hills border. Laura, Derek and the children stay out of sight.”

Valerie nodded. “Of course, Mother.”

Talia inclined her head towards her eldest daughter. “Speak your mind, Valerie.”

“I just wonder if they will turn us away,” Valerie mused, looking off down the road. “If they will risk it, risk us.”

“I have faith there are a few - the few yet important ones, at least - who aren’t stupid enough to do that,” Talia said. “They will sway things in our favor.”

She sensed Valerie glance her way. Intelligence often brought with it a general sense of unease and paranoia. You started thinking about what-if scenarios and built back-up plans by the alphabet. It also brought with it a tendency to ask questions. But Valerie would never question Talia’s ideas or motives, because just like all of Talia’s children, no matter their age, they believed whatever their mother said to the letter. Talia raised them that way.

Valerie nodded. “I’ll have everyone get ready.”

There was a reason Valerie was set to inherit the Hale Empire had the world decided not to fuck itself up, because Valerie, in particular, was a very strong believer that Talia was never wrong.

Talia planned never to change that.

Riches did not last forever, and regimes that bore the crown did not endure all generations. Centuries of history of Hales had taught her that. Not all of them ended up particularly well-off, or
in a good standing with the government, or scandal-free. At one point, a distant ancestor even ended up owning a bordello that served as a front for a vigilante group. Throughout the passage of time though, it was their endurance that kept their name and their family from being buried among the forgotten.

Talia had faced down naysayers, corporate lawyers, businessmen, world leaders, government officials, and idiots more bloodthirsty than this godforsaken zombie scourge.

She was going to secure her family’s place in this undead world or die trying.

“A great wall, eh?” Desmond tapped his fingers against the steering wheel as he pulled the RV to a park a few meters from the chain link fences and towering wall.

“The bigger they are, the louder they go boom,” Talia muttered, looking from side to side. The wall stretched quite far on both sides. A good chunk of the Preserve was Hale property, and Talia made a mental note to find out just how much of it was fenced off and under the Hills’ control and if the Hales’ properties were still secure.

“Good front line defense though, double layer, made of scrap materials but adequate construction, looks sturdy too,” Desmond continued to comment, squinting through the window. “Interested to see how it holds up against rain.”

“And zombies,” Talia commented. She noted the SUV and the Camaro parked to a stop behind them. “Shall we, my love?”

Desmond nodded. “Of course.”

They both got out and ambled towards the gates. It was tall, taller than Talia anticipated. At first glance, the wall seemed empty and unguarded, but that was obviously the impression they wanted passersby to have. She could see boot marks on the ground and a seam at the end where the fences split open, and despite a rather cleverly disguised doorway, the knowledge that a vehicle most likely passed through these walls gave away the fact that there was an opening somewhere. These guys were definitely cautious though and cleared the tracks every time someone got out. The tire tracks they saw had been brushed off pretty far down the road, giving the impression of an abandoned back road.

Talia looked around. As they were supposedly no person ready to speak to them, they were obviously expected to raise their voice.

Desmond made a face. “Shouting is so crude.”

Talia nodded. “Not to mention ill-advised.” She looked up. “If passersby were shouting or honking their car horns to be let in, no doubt they’d only bring a zombie horde.”

“Or they just let people wait until they notice them, but that would be stupid.” Desmond rocked on his heels. “So there is most likely a camera or a communicating device located close by.”
Talia nodded. “Because leaving people waiting tends to elicit impatience and urges them to take action, makes them far too unpredictable.”

“So may we speak to a representative?” Desmond asked, voice genial and not raising at all in volume. “Because we’re not stupid, we’re not in the habit of shouting, and frankly, I really need to pee.”

Talia sighed at him. “Must you act so uncouth, my love?”

“What?” Desmond made a face. “I mean, I’m all for a natural approach, but if they got an actual bathroom, I’d really appreciate it.”

There was silence for a minute and thirty-seven seconds – Talia counted – when they heard a gasp. The pair looked up and saw someone familiar peeking over the top of the wall.

“…Mr. and Mrs. Hale?”

Talia beamed. Oh, how delightful.

“Good morning, my darling,” she greeted warmly.

“Scott, my boy!” Desmond beamed widely, waving an arm.

“Scott McCall was one of the local neighbor kids, son of nurse Melissa McCall and an absentee FBI father. He hung out with the Hale kids whenever they stayed in Beacon Hills every summer vacation and Talia absolutely adored him. Scott was a sweetheart, said ‘please’ and ‘thank you,’ washed his hands, and ate his vegetables. He was inherently polite, with more manners in his pinky finger than Peter had in his entire body, and he never got over that phase of calling them Mr. and Mrs. Hale. So naïve and trusting, and maybe a bit airheaded, but Talia always did have a soft spot for the pure, non-malicious ones.

And they had the most predictable reactions.

Scott turned back, talking to someone behind him.

“Yeah! They’re Beacon Hills residents. You know, the ones who own the Hale Mansion and most of the Preserve.” Scott turned back to them. “I thought you were in New York, Mrs. Hale.”

“We were in New York, darling, but we thought it was time to come home. It’s been three years, hasn’t it?”

“Three years too long.” Scott said wistfully.

Talia hid a smirk. See? How predictable.

“Come home? They came home? They’re not welcome here.”

It was a low hiss, but Talia caught it, and she knew that voice just as well as Scott’s.

“Jackson Whittemore?” Desmond called out, somewhat gleefully.

While Talia adored Scott, Desmond had a fascination with Jackson. Talia had always thought it was hilarious and fascinating to watch. Desmond’s talent for donning a mask of kindness and charm to hide the hard-edged man underneath contrasted nicely with Jackson’s proclivity for bullying and aggressiveness to hide his still childlike naivety.
The Whittemores were businesspeople and among the wealthiest in town. Not as much as the Hales, but no others in town could match the Hales anyway. Talia and Desmond had crossed paths with Scarlett and David Whittemore a few times over the years, and Jackson was almost always with them, especially during dinner parties and town balls. He had always been a delight to watch, always so entertaining when he played at being the pretentious young heir and the obnoxious teenage playboy.

So much teenage angst.

It made Jackson so much more predictable than Scott in that manner.

Desmond brought his hands up to shelter his eyes as he looked beyond Scott to the blond-haired boy behind him. “Well, well, you’ve grown, my boy.”

“His manners still leave something to be desired though.”

Valerie emerged from behind the RV, followed closely by Matthew. They each had a rifle strapped to their backs with the addition of a crowbar dangling from Matt’s belt.

Valerie smiled teasingly up at the wall, brushing her dark hair away from her eyes. Valerie had preferred long hair since she was a child, often coiffed and cut into some classic, understated style. Now she wore it short, in a messy, uneven bob cut that barely grazed her chin. She was beautiful all the same, and even at a distance, Talia could see the effect it had on their spectators.

“V-Valerie,” Jackson gaped, wide-eyed and red-cheeked and leaning against the end of the wall to peer down at her.

Another thing both Talia and Desmond found hilarious was Jackson’s infatuation with their eldest daughter, one that hadn’t diminished at all through the years, not even when faced with the apocalypse, it would seem.

“Hello, Jackson.” For Jackson, Valerie smiled winningly, but for Scott it was far gentler. “And hello, Scott.”

“Valerie! Mattie!” Scott brightened, waving an arm in the air.

Matt grinned. “Hey, Scottie. Damn, it is good to see you. How’s your mom?”

“She’s fine. She’s safe.” Scott suddenly perked up, looking somewhere behind them. “How are… um, where are the others?”

Talia knew just who he was looking for. “They’re fine, my dear. We have some very important, very young cargo though, so I wanted them safe.”

It was a light bulb moment for Scott.

“CC?”

“You remember her?” Matt smiled, pleased. “She’s fine. She’s almost four now.”

“And you remember I was pregnant years ago, right?” Valerie added. “That was why we weren’t able to visit that summer three years ago. I have a son now.”

“You do?” Jackson piped up and then he clamped his jaw shut immediately.

“Yes,” Valerie’s voice was warm, enticing. Talia couldn’t be prouder. “You’ll like him, Jackson.”
There was a shout somewhere beyond the wall, making both Scott and Jackson jump. They looked away from the Hales for a minute, talking indistinctly to whoever was on the other side. When Scott looked back, eyes downcast and face forlorn, Talia knew exactly what he was going to say.

“Sorry, Mrs. Hale. We can’t let you in yet.”

“Not yet. There’s no yet,” Jackson hissed, elbowing him. “We can’t let them in, no matter who they are.”

“You can’t?” Valerie asked, tilting her head to the side. “But this is our home.”

Jackson hesitated, looking pained at the thought of having to deny Valerie anything.

Scott waved a hand. “It’s not that, Val. It’s just… it’s the rules, even if… even if you are family.” He looked so apologetic, like a puppy.

Talia nodded. “Thank you, dear. I did so hope we would see you and your mother. Glad to know you’re both okay. We can wait.”

Scott smiled. “Thanks, Mrs. Hale. We’ll make some calls and make it quick. I promise.”

Scott disappeared and Jackson too, after a beat.

Talia flashed Desmond a grin.

Oh, how fun.

The Hale family spent only three to four months at Beacon Hills during the summer months, and then the rest of the year back at New York City. While Talia thrived in the business and energy of the Big Apple, she also absolutely adored the laidback, earthy soul of Beacon Hills. New York was also home, but Beacon Hills was... special.

And every year, knowing they only had a scant amount of time to spend in the arms of this fair town, Talia spent most of her time around the neighborhood, catching up with everyone and getting to know any new settlers. She would visit new establishments, meet up with old business partners and politicians. She would donate time and resources to maintain the town’s upkeep, devised ways to ensure its continued development and prosperity. She would throw parties, dinners, lunch, brunch dates, pool parties, picnics, any event she could think of, and opened the Hale Mansion to the townspeople. It ensured that she knew everybody and everybody knew her and that by the time she and her children were riding away, waving out the windows at the friends and family they left behind, the Hale family would never be forgotten and they would be dearly missed.

More importantly, their return would always be welcome.

And an hour later, when a well-disguised door opened somewhere to their left and an unfamiliar man stepped out to greet them, Talia was confident she would prevail.

She always won.
The stranger was tall and built, with a full salt and pepper beard, and sharp blue eyes. He was dressed head to toe in leather with a rifle strapped to his back, a handgun in a shoulder holster and two more on both thighs. His eyes were sharp and assessing and his steps were quiet and measured, a hunter’s lope.

Talia had an impeccable memory for faces and names, and this man was entirely unfamiliar to her, nor could she see any family resemblance among the families she knew and remembered.

A new settler then, and considering that he was heavily-armed and chosen to come out and talk to them, this man was in favor with the town. Most likely he arrived at Beacon Hills sometime in the three years the Hales had been gone.

Talia remained seated on the RV’s front bumper, with Valerie beside her and Matt leaning against the side. Desmond had been walking to and fro, studying the foliage and surreptitiously looking for the camera and microphone – and finding two of them easily, one hidden amidst the shrubbery to their left and another high up the trees to their right. Only one seemed to be working. Chances were they switch cams to save battery.

“How many of you are there?” the stranger asked, not even introducing himself. He addressed her and Valerie, obviously aware that they were both in charge. Above the wall, Scott and Jackson peered down, as did five other guards, their figures and faces partially hidden, but guns at the ready.

Talia looked at the hunter and tilted her head to the side in thought. She lifted her head and addressed the man above their heads. She refused to be intimated by a man she didn’t know.

“How many of you are there?” she called out.

John Stilinski was still in his Sheriff’s uniform, the star glinting brightly in the sun when he stepped closer to the wall. He leaned his elbows against the edge and peered down at them, a familiar, smiling figure.

“Hello, Talia, Desmond, Matthew, Valerie. Always a pleasure.”

Oh, but Talia had missed this man. John had always been kind to her family, protective and caring. He was a smart man though and sharp as nails, and had seen beneath Talia’s friendly veneer and Desmond’s charm the moment he met them. Yet he readily accepted Talia’s ambition and general disdain for life and Desmond’s manipulations, and was kind to all of the Hale children. John had always been a bit of an enigma that way.

(Paired with his wife, Claudia, they were two of the most well-regarded and influential people in town. Oh, how eager Talia was to see them both.)

And now, in a torn world where social constructs had eroded, guess who was still in a position of great power?

The hunter spoke up. “I was told these were the Hales, owners of the Hale Mansion.” He was obviously not addressing them, and he was obviously not impressed at all.

John sniffed. “And most of the establishments around town, to be honest. The Hale family was the one who originally put up Beacon Hills. They own two-thirds of the town and a majority of the Preserve.” He smiled down at them. “Talia, Desmond, this is Chris Argent, moved into town three years ago with his daughter, which is why he’s probably not a familiar face. Remember that was the year you didn’t come visit because of Val’s pregnancy? The Argents have been living here
ever since.”

Chris Argent – and now they had a name to the face – looked at each of them, intensely scrutinizing. “Claims of ownership are merely technicalities. They might own the town, but titles don’t have much bearing nowadays.”

“Ah, too true.” Desmond nodded.

The hunter raised a brow at them. “Oh, and you accept that easily?”

Talia kept her gaze even, unflinching in the face of this stranger. “Of course we do, and yet this is our home. We came home.”

Chris scoffed. “Sentimental.”

Talia grinned. “True, but I like to believe sentimentality is also a currency these days. Well, aside from what now passes as currency.”

That had John chuckling. “You didn’t come empty-handed, I take it?”

Talia grinned, confident. “Of course we do, John.”

“The jeep and the motorcycle just a few meters off, those are yours too, right?” Chris asked, eyes narrowing. “Don’t pretend they’re not one of yours.”

Talia scoffed. “Oh, we’re not hiding anything. They’re going to approach your walls after we do and they will be let in, same as us.”

“We have rules here,” Chris pressed, eyes narrowing. “And that applies even if you are a former resident. We cannot and do not just take people in, no matter if they are personal acquaintances.” The way he spoke meant he was addressing not just the Hales. Above their heads, Scott looked alarmed, staring down at the hunter. Jackson looked torn.

John was rubbing his face, obviously hiding a smile, oddly amused despite the situation.

Ah. Now Talia could see it. Chris Argent was in charge of their security. Curious.

“Okay.” Talia settled down on the RV’s front bumper and made herself comfortable.

Chris’ face didn’t change, but she felt the question in his gaze.

“It’s not as if we have a choice,” Valerie added. “This is our home, so we came back. It’s your choice if you want our family to come in or not.” She shrugged delicately. “I can understand your hesitation though. If you let us in, it makes it all the harder if you do decide to kick us out.”

“The operative word being ‘if,’” Matthew commented, with a grin.

“So we’ll wait.” Talia smiled serenely. “Matthew, get me the lawn chair from the RV. I have a lot of patience, but I’m not going to do it standing up or sitting on a bumper.”

“Oh, how lovely. A picnic. We can’t grill here since the scent will spread, but I can whip up something in the kitchen,” Desmond said cheerfully, following Matthew out back. “Any requests, my love?”

“Anything is fine, love,” Talia called out. “Just get me some dried fruit, would you?”
Valerie stood up, stretching. “I can probably get some workout done while we wait.”

The hunter was silent, but Talia knew when a man was unnerved.

She turned away and smiled.

It felt like victory.

It took less than seven hours since the moment Talia Hale arrived at their gates before Beacon Hills finally allowed them home.

To be honest, it was a hell of a lot sooner than Stiles expected. He was almost thinking the Hales would have to spend the night waiting. He was sure they had planned for it. But when mid-afternoon came in, the sun high up and merciless but the air cool enough thanks to the tall trees, Stiles was at the other side of Hedge-3 when the gates parted and an RV, an SUV, and a really spanking black Camaro were allowed inside.

Gossip spread fast, even faster when it was about anything that disrupted their fragile peace, and so ridiculously faster when it was news about outsiders.

A small crowd had gathered to meet the Hales, though thankfully it seemed like a controlled crowd. They were at a safe distance back. Stiles’ Dad and Chris were at the helm of the welcome party, flanked on either side by armed and ready Enforcers, including Scott and Jackson. Jordan, as always, was to John’s right. Stiles knew it was highly unlikely that the Hales would put up any sort of resistance, but he was always glad when his Dad had backup.

Stiles was standing apart from them, perched atop Chris’s army jeep and watching from a vantage point as the three vehicles parked themselves neatly in a row. At his feet and leaning against the jeep were the lovely Lydia Martin and the silent Isaac Lahey.

Stiles didn’t start out as friends with the red-haired and immensely intelligent Lydia Martin. Oh no. They had a rivalry so fierce that John used to not-joke that he might need to put restraining orders on the both of them. What made it even more amusing was that their fights never even bordered on the physical, never. Rather, they threw words at one another, so sharp, biting, and scandalous that anyone in hearing distance tended to run, duck for cover, put their hands over their ears, or, at one memorable occasion, had a heart attack.

But now, post-Z, Lydia and Stiles had become close enough to be each other’s closest confidantes.

(And seriously, it just about warmed Stiles’ cockles whenever he thought about the pinched look on Jackson Whittemore’s face whenever he was faced with proof that his forever nemesis was bestest buddies with his girlfriend.)

Lydia was also one of Stiles’ benefactors - a much deeper relationship in Stiles’ opinion, to be honest - but that was a story for another time.
“Are you planning on stepping in anytime soon?” Lydia asked. Stiles had always admired the absolutely magical way she managed to remain made up, spotless and smelling good in a post-apocalyptic world with limited resources, like say water, soap, and make-up.

“The Hales are one of us, Lydia,” Isaac said, frowning. “They’re good people, even before. We shouldn’t turn them away.”

“You can’t expect people to be the same now considering the circumstances. You can’t trust anyone, no matter how nice they were to you before,” Lydia snapped.

Isaac made a face at that, looking none-too-pleased at Lydia’s words, and with good reason.

Pre- and post-Z, Isaac had always possessed a quiet and unassuming demeanor. Oh, but don’t mistake that for gentleness. Isaac was the younger son of a drunk and abusive man, freed thanks to the efforts of – you guessed it! Or maybe you didn’t, you suck – the Hales. Desmond Hale had taken a shine to him, hiring him every summer to work as an errand boy and gardener at the Hale Mansion. After finding out what Isaac was dealing with at home, Desmond invited one of his attorneys to get Isaac and his older brother Camden emancipated and their father imprisoned.

So yes, Isaac was definitely feeling offended on behalf of the Hales. He obviously did not care for anyone bad-mouthing them. And he wasn’t the only one.

“Lydia,” Stiles said, voice calm but arresting. He glanced down at her.

Lydia huffed. She didn’t take back her words, but she didn’t offer anymore. She of all people should know that Stiles wasn’t going to tolerate anyone saying anything unsavory against the Hales. Not now. Not when they were here, against all odds, and there was a chance that…

Stiles steeled himself. There was no use getting too excited until he had a clear picture of what he was dealing with.

The Hales exited their vehicles and Stiles would deny it, but he couldn’t help holding his breath until the second he saw Talia Hale.

Three years was a long time, but that lady was still the second most beautiful woman he ever saw.

Talia descended the RV gracefully. Desmond followed, looking jovial and amused. Matthew exited the SUV, and Valerie followed from the Camaro.

Four out of twelve, eh?

Stiles chuckled under his breath. “Oh, you never cease to amaze me, Talia.”

“Are you going mastermind on us again?” Isaac asked, looking up. “Because don’t. It’s freaky.”

“I’m doing no such thing,” Stiles said, waving a hand. He watched as John and Chris approached Talia, the former pleased and the latter with a blank, neutral expression on his face. Chris was a soldier and had the best poker face Stiles had ever seen.

“When you do that thing you do, bad things always happen,” Isaac muttered.

Lydia scoffed. “It’s Stiles. Bad things always happen because good things never happen to him.”

“Hm. True.” Stiles nodded, straightening his bomber jacket. “Good things never just happen to me, which is why I make them happen and grab the opportunities whenever they arise. And honestly,
He slid off the jeep, landing on his feet.

“It’s showtime, kiddies.”

Isaac made a face. “I just said don’t do the mastermind thing.”

Stiles winked at him before walking towards John, Chris, and the assembled Enforcers. Lydia followed behind without pause. Isaac stayed by the jeep. He was a good ally and confidante, but he disliked the subterfuge, intricacies, and machinations that came with world domination.

It was fine. Leaders needed subjects, loyal ones. Isaac was much beloved in that manner.

Stiles fell into step beside Beacon’s Head Medic, Dr. Jodi Asa, who was also approaching the group.

Dr. Jodi raised a hand as he neared, almost smacking him right on the nose. “I am not, and do not want to be, part of any conversation you’re going to have.” She glared at him. “I’ll see to the inspection of the Hales, and you are not to talk to me at any part of the process.” She stomped forward, messenger bag banging on her hip.

Stiles grinned. “You hate me so much, and it’s so wonderful how absolutely unrequited that is,” he commented, even before Dr. Jodi was out of earshot. She raised her middle finger at him over her shoulder. “I love you too, doctor.”

Lydia simply sighed.

Dr. Jodi Asa was in her late thirties, blonde, freckled, and was the former Chief of Surgery at Beacon Hills Memorial Hospital. Post-Z, she became Beacon Hill’s Head Medic and continued to run the hospital with a small but capable staff, a staff that included Scott’s nurse mother, Melissa McCall. She and her team were usually called upon to verify the health and non-zombie condition of the people who passed through Beacon Hills’ walls, and conducted monthly checkups of the townspeople to ensure nobody was zombie-fied and hiding it.

“…will require a medical inspection,” John said, motioning to Dr. Jodi.

“Of course,” Talia said, smiling primly. “To check for bite or scratch marks, I assume.” She waved a hand behind her.

Matthew shrugged and Valerie didn’t even bat an eyelash as she began to unzip her coat. Matthew went ahead and pulled both coat and shirt off his frame, unabashed about his bare torso and the scars and marks that littered his frame.

“You don’t have to strip here!” Scott squeaked, holding a hand to his eye as Valerie started unbuttoning her blouse.

Oh, look! That secret vein on the back of Chris’ neck was throbbing!

Desmond sighed. “Our children are far less modest than we are, Doctor.” He smiled at Dr. Jodi. “My wife and I prefer the trailer.”

“We have nothing to hide.” Valerie shrugged, not even a little uncomfortable at the gazes trained on her bare collarbones, the top swell of her breasts, and the purple bra strap peeking over her shoulder.
“A lie, but we appreciate the sentiment,” Chris bit back.

“Okay then, let me amend that.” Valerie waved a hand, which only served to let slip the entire left side of her blouse. Scott yelped, and really, that only proved that he wasn’t really covering his eyes. Jackson stepped forward, hand raised, before he stopped. “Val.”

Valerie smiled. “I’m fine, Jackson.” She raised a brow at Chris. “As I was saying, we have nothing to hide on our bodies. No bites or scratches or infection. But feel free to check.”

Behind Stiles, he heard Lydia’s huff of indignation. Jackson’s infatuation with Valerie had been a thing since they were children. Stiles had to stifle a laugh. It seems like even his strawberry blonde genius was not immune to regular human emotions. Fancy that.

“Let’s find some cover, shall we?” Dr. Jodi said, motioning to the Hedge guardhouse. In short order, she had pulled down a curtain hanging from the rafters, allowing them all a modicum of privacy. Valerie and Matthew went first by virtue of already being partially undressed.

John and Chris shared a glance and John stepped up. “Your vehicles and all your possessions will remain here for now. As is our policy, we do not take any personal items from the people who enter our walls, on the condition that they declare what it is they are bringing in with them. We know you might be lying, but we consider it a show of faith.”

“As for your stay here, whether short or long-term,” John shrugged, “Well, this is a pretty unusual occasion. Usually it takes a lot of deliberation before we let people pass our walls.”

“Oh, but the Hales always seem to find themselves the exception to any and all circumstances.” Stiles grinned, clapping his Dad on the shoulder and stepping up beside him.

Talia smiled back. “Funny, isn’t it? Though that’s not always by my doing. It all just seems to happen that way.”

They looked at another and Stiles resisted the far too strong urge to throw himself into her arms like he used to do. He was already twenty-two years old, for god’s sake. He shouldn’t be this sentimental.

“Talia.”

“Stiles, my darling.”

“If this were a movie, they’d be showing a movie montage of your good times together right about now,” John said, amused.

“Our summers through the years?” Stiles teased.

Talia laughed, loud and real, and Stiles once again had to fight the impulse to embrace her. Ah. Sentiment. There it was again.

“Good to see you too, Desmond, sir,” Stiles said.

Desmond was calm and hunky-dory as always, and he merely gave Stiles a wave and an indulgent smile. “Oh, go on. Feel free to ignore me in favor of my wife. We can catch up later.”

Stiles grinned.
“Honestly, though, I didn’t think the Hales would come here after all these years,” John commented.

Talia shrugged. “Where else did you think we would stay?”

“New York, maybe? Where you’re from?” Chris commented, tone flat but heavy with meaning. “Far more well-defended, well-stocked, and walled-in from what news we’ve heard.”

“Oh, yes. New York is all that and more. But also possibly not that at all, which is why my family ended up here,” Talia said, tone never straying from companionable and friendly.

“I can tell you though, it’s not a good place for the children,” Desmond added.

“Valerie already popped out the little monster, then?” John asked, grinning.

As if on cue, Valerie appeared, smiling and pleased as punch. Stiles heard a distinct hurk somewhere behind him and the sound of a lady’s scoff, and had to bite down a laugh as he watched Valerie. She was buttoning up her blouse, not the least bit ashamed at showing off her bra and stomach, and the fact that her shorts were still unbuttoned and unzipped.

“Spencer Hadrian Hale. He’s turning three soon,” Valerie said, stuffing her blouse into her shorts. Matthew appeared behind her, dressed only in pants and a lone boot. He handed her coat back to her.

“Spender Hadrian Hale,” Stiles repeated, tasting the name on his tongue. “Oh, how posh. Should have expected that from you.”

“You’ll like him,” Valerie said, with a wink.

Stiles grinned. “With a name like that, I already do.”

“Stiles, my man, good to see you,” Mattie greeted exuberantly.

Mattie was a bear of a man, an Alpha male through and through with his big build and booming voice, an imposing presence even when they were only children. Underneath all that though, he was a giant softie and far more laidback than any of his siblings.

“Hey, Mattie,” Stiles said, fondness creeping up.

“Darlings, do clean up. The end of the world isn’t an excuse to look like savages,” Talia tutted at her children. She held out a hand to her husband. “Desmond, my love. It’s our turn.”

“Oh, goody. I haven’t been searched for bite marks in a while.” Desmond looked genuinely excited, letting his wife’s hand alight on the crook of his elbow. “I wonder how she’ll go about it. Hope she won’t touch my left thigh. You know how ticklish it is.”

Talia turned to John and Chris, mostly Chris. “As for New York, and all places from there to here, we would be glad to share some intel.” She grinned. “And believe me, my family has been thorough in our investigations.”

Matthew laughed, loud and booming. “Oh, yeah. Didn’t you wonder why it took us nearly two years to get here?” He winked at Stiles.

“But first,” Talia waved a hand, “The rest of my family is still out there. May we have them come in as well?”
Chris face turned incredibly disgruntled, and in Stiles’s experience very few people had made him look that way. He himself was included in that shortlist and that was no mean feat. “Ah, yes, the motorcycle and the jeep.”

Talia just smiled and Desmond was tugging her along, apparently excited to be strip-searched.

Chris’ eyes narrowed. “There’s more, isn’t there?”

Stiles glanced at his father. So far their intel said there was someone on a motorcycle – which duh, was obviously Peter – and a jeep wrangler a few meters off the path, waiting. Obviously, they should have widened their search.

That was one point for Talia.

Hell, make that two points. Talia already got four of them inside Beacon’s walls.

“Maybe?” Talia shrugged. “I have my grandbabies still out there in one of the vehicles…”

Then she went for the kill.

“And Derek, who is riding who knows where.” She smiled, sharp and knowing, and all for Stiles.

“They can wait to be let in, don’t worry. We have supplies. But I would like to know what time frame I’m working with,” Talia said. “I’ll just have us checked and then we can continue our little chat.” With a wave, she followed her husband towards the awaiting doctor.

Matthew and Valerie remained near the vehicles, quietly smug.

Stiles felt the brush of a dainty hand against his lower back.

“She’s good,” Lydia, murmured. She wasn’t surprised. None of them were.

Talia was a beast.

And Derek…

Stiles wasn’t stupid enough to deny that Talia’s words had affected him, not with about two dozen witnesses.

The day hadn’t ended yet and Talia’s racking up points.

“Stiles.”

If Stiles hadn’t expected it, he would have flinched. As it was, he adopted a polite expression.

Noshiko Yukimura approached their little group, looking as calm and serene as ever. Her family, the Yukimuras, had moved into town years ago. Noshiko had opened up a weapons shop, while her husband worked as a teacher at the local high school. Stiles was good friends with their daughter, Kira.

“Hai, sensei?” he asked, pasting on a smile.

Noshiko’s lip twitched, the way it always did whenever Stiles attempted Japanese around her.

“Shall we?” she asked, waving a hand.
Stiles pursed his lips. “Of course.”

The Elders moved fast.

He glanced over at Talia and Desmond over at the outhouse and then turned back to Valerie and Matt. “It’s good to see you all, Val, Mattie, but duties await.”

“You’re not staying?” Mattie frowned.

“Dad and Chris will be better hosts,” Stiles said.

Valerie smirked. “See you later, Stiles.”

Stiles laughed at that. Later was right.

He turned on his heels to follow after Noshiko. He met Lydia’s eye and nodded to her. She nodded back and Stiles heard the faint sound of boots behind him. He didn’t have to look back to know that Lydia immediately disappeared in the crowd, grabbing Isaac on the way. For all she and Stiles were occasionally antagonistic towards each other, she knew better than to serve him some lip at the moment.

Noshiko led him silently and gracefully towards a small house just far off from where the crowd was gathered, but one that had a very good view of the Hedge and the proceedings, including the arrival of their visitors.

Stiles knew Noshiko did yoga in her spare time, which they had a lot of now considering the, you know, collapse of modern society. He hoped he could have even a smidge of her grace, because at this moment, he suddenly found himself wound a little too tight.

Two years of the zombie apocalypse taught him to expect the unexpected, and he had done well so far to do just that. Very, very few scenarios could crop up that Stiles did not have a backup plan or ten already in place for. But he wasn’t omniscient and even he could not anticipate everything. With the Hales having returned to Beacon Hills, Stiles could already feel things starting to shift like a volcano settling in until the inevitable eruption.

He needed to put a few more plans in motion, and made a mental note to do just that once he got back to the Ironshoppe.

The house they entered was the home of the Morrisseys, a nice couple with three kids and two dogs, who opted to get out of town even when the flow of the scourge had already picked up speed.

They didn’t make it three kilometers past the borders.

Thirteen-year-old Mary Morrissey was proof of that, found crawling towards the Hedge with a bite mark on her shoulder and scared out of her mind.

Stiles took care of that one.

He had to.

No one could.

Noshiko waved him in and Stiles walked right into the living room. There was music on, not from the television, but from the little radio placed on the coffee table between two cups of tea or coffee, maybe even wine. Mr. Morrissey was known to have a cellar.
Two of the Elders were seated – Shun Valdo on the loveseat and Virginia Dalton on the recliner. Shun was past eighty and was a quiet sort of man. Like most of the Elders, he had semi-adopted the pathetic Stiles of pre-Z. He fought in the World War and had all the appropriate scars, bullet holes, and the PTSD. He was well-respected in town and a lot of the kids were scared of him, save for Stiles. Stiles adored his gory, traumatic war stories. Virginia, who Stiles fondly called Pepper – and yes, she was nicknamed for that very famous Virginia Pepper – turned seventy-five last year. They held a Marvel-themed birthday party for her. Stiles was dressed as Tony Stark, because duh, and Pepper showed off her ballroom dance skills like a woman in her prime.

These two, despite all their love for Stiles and the fair land of Beacon, were the hardest sells. Because Shun was a war veteran who knew how deep Stiles’ madness went, and Pepper was too fair and too sharp and knew better than to let Stiles win the world.

They were the foil to Stiles’ insanity.

Sometimes they even succeeded.

Noshiko smiled, leaving them to it and heading towards the kitchen.

“Good afternoon, Elders. Well, two of seven, at least.” He threw himself down on the couch.

“Mieczyslaw, this smells of your handiwork.”

Uh-oh. That was Shun’s serious voice.

“And it is no use denying it, kiddo.” Pepper stared knowingly at him over the rim of her thin metal-framed glasses.

Stiles decided to drop the act. It wouldn’t work on these two anyway. “I understand how it looks, Pep, Shun, but the Hales coming here was not by my invitation or my plan.”

“We find that hard to believe considering your relationship with them, two of them more than most.” Pepper propped her chin on her hand, looking bored, as if she already knew how this conversation was going to go and was just confirming her thoughts.

Stiles consciously made sure he didn’t sound defensive. He knew this situation didn’t look well for him, and if the Elders decided he had a hand in it… well, their influence on the townspeople ran fast and deep.

He was in dangerous waters.

“I have never and will never deny any personal relations I have with the Hales, with any of them,” Stiles said. “But them coming here was not in my plan.”

“But you did plan for this possibility, we assume?” Shun asked.

“Yes, I did.” Stiles felt it better not to lie. “But I didn’t invite them here nor did I contact them at any point after the second stage of Beacon Hills’ post-invasion reconstruction.”

“And during the first stage?” Shun asked.

Stiles looked them both in the eye, honest. “I tried to reach out to them, to him. When I didn’t find a sign, I stopped. It was fool’s hope to think they would come back here.”

“And yet, you did not seem surprised to see them,” Pepper pointed out.
Stiles shrugged. “I wasn’t a fool to think that the Hale family, of all people, wouldn’t survive this. Finding out they made it all the way from New York to here was shocking, but it wasn’t a surprise. When I saw them at the other side of the Hedge, I realized that doing the unexpected was exactly something they would do.”

“And case in point,” he stared them down, “While the Elders definitely don’t mind questioning my work or my methods, they certainly made things so much easier for the Hales when they let them come into town without much fanfare. A decision that did not include any input from me, might I add.”

Neither Shun nor Pepper disputed that fact because as they said: people who lived in glass houses shouldn't throw stones. Stiles’ words held a lot of sway around here, but god knew he didn’t even lift a finger to help the Hales. Yet here they were, already making a home inside their borders.

Let it never be said that Stiles didn’t know how to swim with sharks.

“Fighting words, Mieczyslaw,” Shun said.

Stiles hummed and drummed his fingers against his thigh. “I know. I just wanted us all to be aware that there are obviously a lot of players in this game. I don’t want to take all the credit.”

“I agree.” Pepper smirked, leaning back. “But this would have been the inevitable conclusion, anyway. Let’s not lie and say that all of us in this room don't want the Hales here.”

And whatever information or resources they possess, Stiles thought to himself.

He couldn’t really blame the Elders for that though. God knew sentiment shouldn’t be a deterrent to doing what needed to be done.

“We have rules for a reason, rules that we all have enacted and enforced to the highest degree,” Shun said. “It is how and why our town has held strong over the past two years and so far we do not see any signs of that progress diminishing. It is obvious to us all that having the Hales here can only work in our favor, but only if we thread lightly. This is a delicate matter.”

Stiles raised an eyebrow. “I agree, and just who will be the conductor of this symphony?”

Pepper leaned over, grabbing her cup of whatever. That seemed to be the end of their inquiry on Stiles' motives or loyalty, for now, anyway. Noshiko appeared toting a third cup of whatever it was they were drinking. She placed it in front of Stiles.

“For now, it is the will of the Elders that the Hale family be kept under observation and assigned a handler. They will remain an outlier, and are not allowed to associate with the townspeople or be integrated into the town,” Pepper said.

“A handler?” Stiles brow furrowed, mind whirring a mile a second.

Pepper nodded. “Your father was a candidate, but he has enough duties as it is with the town and the residents falling under his jurisdiction. The Argents are unfamiliar with the Hales and they have a lot on their plate leading the Enforcers, so…”

Stiles nodded slowly before it dawned on him. Oh, they couldn’t mean…

“We feel this task will be best served by Dr. Alan Deaton.”

Dammit.
Stiles kept his face blank.

“A town meeting will be scheduled before this week is done, after which the voting will commence. The results will be released the morning after,” Shun added. “It won’t do us any good to leave the Hales unmoored for too long though. We will need to decide immediately if they will be allowed to stay here permanently.”

“We will decide on the date before the day is done.” Pepper turned to Noshiko. “Have all pertinent personnel informed please.”

“Of course, Ma’am,” she said.

“Do try not to make a mess, Mieczyslaw.” Shun raised his cup to Stiles, hiding a smile.

“And don’t forget,” Pepper leaned in and patted his arm, “You’re not the only one looking after the town.”

“I won’t make a mess, Shun, and I know that, of course I do, Pep.” Stiles pouted at them. He grabbed his cup, raised it, and downed it in solidarity.

Brandy in a tea cup.

Ah well, it’s the end of the world anyway.

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