Hard to Believe it's Not Dead and Gone

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Summary

"I went to Charming when this all started. It was overrun."
"We took it back."

Notes

Unbeta'd.
Warnings: Torture, Cannibalism
Fic title comes from Ghosts by Banners
Fic preview
This is obviously a Zombie AU set in Son Shine Verse. (An alternate universe set in an alternate universe...I've lost some kind of control over my life, I'm sure.)

The outbreak/infection/what caused the dead to walk, started after Season 3 of Sons of Anarchy when the guys were in prison. So almost everyone is still alive and none of the shit from season four thru seven happened. For Teen Wolf it would have been a few episodes in to 3A because Cora is with the Pack. There will be characters from the later seasons of both shows appearing though.

This first chapter is basically a prologue, showing how Stiles ends up in Charming and giving some background about why he isn't with the pack anymore. There's going to be a
bit of a time-jump for Chapter 2, and I promise there will be more of the pack in that chapter than there is in this one. I'll add relationship tags for Teen Wolf when I get them all sorted out, I have a list.

So, you don't actually have to read Betrayal is Unforgivable or Crossed Lines to read this, though you probably have if you're reading it. If you haven't, the background you need to know is Stiles is Gemma's son from a one-night stand she had with Sheriff Stilinski. Stiles grew up in Beacon Hills with his dad but spent summers in Charming with his brother Jax. He didn't find out Gemma was his mom until he was eight. Reading Mama Gemma might be able to give more insight on that, it's a short one-shot.

I created Son Shine AU's series tag thing to avoid any confusion later on when I add another sequel or one-shot set after Betrayal and Crossed Lines.
He was losing the sunlight quickly as he trudged through the woods. Old injuries had weakened him, caused him to slow down. He didn’t cover nearly as much distance as he normally would. Not that it mattered much. He had no set destination. He was simply wandering.

From sunup to sundown, he hiked through the woods. He avoided the roads as much as he possibly could, knowing from past experience just how dangerous they were. At night, he slept in caves, with traps at the entrance to keep the walkers out, or in extreme circumstances, he would bungee himself up in a high tree. Rarely did he find himself in an abandon cabin, and when he did, he knew better than to take advantage. It did not matter how isolated or empty something might seem, there was always a chance that someone could be watching and waiting.

Sometimes, though, his bones would ache and his eyes would grow heavy. He would come across a small log house in the middle of the forest and he would give in to that need he tried so hard to bury. Four walls, a relatively soft bed, they were like heaven after spending so long without them. He really should have known that such extravagances would get him into trouble one day.

He was so exhausted when he stumbled across the cabin, that he didn’t even find it odd that there were only two walkers milling about. That was his first mistake, but hey, everyone got sloppy once in a while. He did remember to barricade the door and block the windows. His second mistake was closing his eyes even after he read what was written on the ceiling above the twin bed he had laid on.

DANGER. GO NOW.

It was an ominous message, but not the first he had seen on the road. It wasn’t the most original either. Whatever was used to paint it was faded with time, so he chose to ignore it. Hindsight, that was a bad idea.

Being rudely awoken by hands grabbing him roughly and pulling him to his feet was unexpected. He got his bearings enough to see an access point in the floorboards where they had gotten in undetected. He grasped the blade he kept in his pocket, prepared to jam it in the head of his attacker, when a second perpetrator took advantage of his focus to hit him on the back of the head with what felt like a two-by-four.

They had been going around in circles getting nowhere for what felt like hours. It was his fault, he did not agree with the mission, although he knew it had to happen. It was a risk he was going to have to let his men take, whether he wanted them to or not.

“Tell me again.” Jax ordered gruffly, earning a slightly annoyed look from the younger man across from him. Considering they had gone over the plan a handful of times in the last week, the look wasn’t exactly unwarranted. “One more time.”

“We’re gonna take the highway north.” Juice relayed, pointing to the map rolled out over the reaper. “Scavengers have been lighting up the back roads. They know people will take those to avoid the mess of walkers clogging up the interstate.”

“Walkers that you will have to deal with.” There were hundreds, maybe thousands of them roaming the major roadways. “How do you plan to take them on? There’s too many for hand-to-hand, and you are not going to have enough ammo to use the guns.”
The ammunition situation was the whole reason for this little shit-show. They had used up the bulk of their stock when they took back Charming. That was nearly a year ago. They didn’t have the supplies to make their own, and the Wahewa, who had once done it for them, had to focus on keeping themselves alive, they couldn’t worry about SAMCRO.

“We attached the snowplow to the 4x4, so we can run them down.” It was good to know the snowplow they picked up when they were in Tahoe would not be going to waste. “We gotta do this, Jax.”

“I know.” They were dangerously low on ammo as it was. Once they ran out, it was game over. “You’re sure this place is still intact?”

“As of two days ago, yeah.” The kid flashed him a sheepish grin, knowing he was still in deep shit for what he had done two days prior.

“Right. Your scouting mission.” A scouting mission Jax and the others had not authorized. “Who are you taking?”

This suicide run had been Juice’s idea, that is why Jax made him the lead on it. It was his intel that gave them the location of a little known army surplus store that had been run by some survivalist nut Juice had known before. The paranoid bastard had kept hidden underground bunkers on the property, full of weapons and ammunition.

There was no guarantee the load was still there, or that there could be anything found in the surplus store. There was no telling if anyone would make it there or come back alive. That’s why it was a volunteer only mission, and aside from Juice, they could only spare two others.

“Miles and V-Lin.”

“The prospects?” That was not going to happen. Those two had no experience going on that kind of run. “Absolutely not. Chibs, Tig, and Happy all said they would go up with you. Choose two of them or I will do it for you.”

“Tig’s kid is here. Happy has his mom and aunt. Chibs has his daughter, who may not be in this country but could still be alive. I’m not taking anyone who has someone they would be leaving behind. Not for this.” That was Juice’s biggest fault, right there. He cared too goddamn much. “V-Lin, Miles, and me, our families are gone.”

Juice didn’t talk about his birth family often, not even before the dead began walking among them. It was harder for him now. They all knew what happened to them. They had been watching the news with morbid fascination as New York City’s five boroughs fell by the militaries hand, in an effort to keep what they believed was an infection from spreading.

“They’re quick on their feet, that’ll make it easier to get in and out fast.” Juice made a good point, not that the other Sons were slow, but V-Lin and Miles had youth on their side. “And if we don’t make it back then you’re not losing much.”

“I’m going to pretend like you didn’t just say that.” He was not about to get into a discussion about Juice’s worth right now. That was Chibs territory, not his. “What time are you leaving?”

“Dawn.” That made sense. No one with half a brain traveled under the cover of darkness anymore. “If everything goes smoothly, then we should be back by nightfall, but realistically sometime the following afternoon.”

“Don’t take any unnecessary chances.” The whole run was a chance in itself. They did not need to
risk driving at night just to shave a few hours off the trip. “You need to double check that
everything is in order and then make it an early night. No drinking. You need to be well rested and
at the top of your game tomorrow.”

“Yeah, okay.” The younger man offered him a smile as he stood and made his way to the chapel
doors, only to falter before opening them. “Jax?”

“What?”

“Beacon Hills is only twenty miles out from the surplus store.” He broke it to him gently, as if he
was giving him bad news, and maybe he was. “I can look again.”

“No, not this time.” It killed him to say that, made him feel as if he was giving up. “If you had a
more experienced crew going with you then I would say okay, but Beacon Hills is in the dead zone
and the prospects aren’t ready for that.”

The dead zone, that was what they called the places that belonged entirely to the walkers,
scavengers, and cannibals. They were the most treacherous places you could travel through. There
was one large dead zone that started in Chico and stretched over the border into Oregon. It was an
area Juice and the prospects would be knee deep in come morning.

“You stay on task. You get to the surplus store, get what you can, and head back. No other stops.”
They could not afford to get sidetracked.

“Okay.” Juice agreed, but didn’t seem happy about it and Jax understood why. Stiles was the clubs
unfinished business. He was the only person they could not find.

During the first wave of the ‘infection’ they had managed to break out of prison once the guards
had abandon their posts. They made it to the evacuation centers the citizens of Charming had been
moved to, gathered the family members that were there, and left again. They traveled up and down
California looking for other members that had been scattered about. They found Opie’s mom
Mary, one of Tig’s daughters, Bobby’s son, ex-wife, and her boyfriend. They had Happy’s mother
and aunt. Hell, they made it all the way to Oregon and managed to retrieve Gemma’s father, Nate.
They found everyone but Stiles.

“I know he’s alive.” He put as much conviction behind his voice as he could muster, because he
needed someone else to believe that too. “He’s not some ghost I’m making us chase after. If he
were dead, I would know it. He’s alive.”

“I know.” Juice locked eyes with him, letting him see the belief he to held. “We’ll find him.”

The last time he had been tied to a chair and tortured, it was in the Argents basement after his last
lacrosse game. He knew what to expect then, a little electroshock therapy and a few punches from
a geriatric. The guy who had him this time, had an array of instruments on a tray waiting to be
used.

As a knife cut into his chest, not deep enough to kill, only to bleed, he thought about asking why,
but it was a stupid question. Why didn’t matter. Even before the dead began to rise, people did
awful shit to one another for no reason at all.

“Most would have begun screaming by now.” The man who had spent the last hour or so
deliberately slicing patterns into his bare chest noted. “Not your first time beneath a blade.”
It was far from his first time, but he was not about to admit that to this guy. Truth be told, even if he hadn’t learned not to scream a long time ago, he still wouldn’t be giving up any howls of pain. He couldn’t feel the knife breaking the skin of his chest. He didn’t know if that had something to do with nerve damage he may have suffered from old burns on his chest, or if it was because the head wound he had acquired earlier that evening was bleeding sluggishly, and the blood loss was causing him to go in and out of consciousness. Either way, he was not feeling much of anything.

“Brunski,” A new voice joined the other. “You’ve got a few more hours with that one, and then put him in the storage room. Garrett and Violet have eyes on another in Millville, who Tully’s crew in Red Bluff will enjoy. So when they bring him in, leave him untouched. We’ll trade him for supplies.”

“And this one?” He assumed Brunski was referring to him, considering he was the only other person in the general vicinity besides them. "Are we trading him to Tully too?"

“Tully likes his toys pristine, this one wasn’t even close to that before you started carving into him.” He couldn’t argue with that. He had become the not-so proud owner of plenty of scars over the years, some nastier than others. “We’ll keep him. He’ll make a very nice meal.”

He was captured by cannibals. That was fucking fantastic.

“Did he bring anything in with him that we could use?” The man who had yet to identify himself asked.

“All I found on him was a knife, a gold wedding band, and a badge.” He yanked at his bonds when he realized they had taken what little he still held dear, which elicited a delighted but deranged smile out of Brunski. “That’s the most life I’ve seen out of him since we brought him in. Must be personal items, not things he just picked up. Oh, and the badge said ‘Beacon Hills County Sheriff’s Department.’"

“We’ve got a townie. Interesting.” He supposed that meant he had not only made it back to California, but was back in Beacon Hills. “He might just prove useful after all.”

In retrospect, Juice should have listened to Jax. The prospects were a bad call. They weren’t ready for runs. They were nervous, jumping at their own shadows. They were making enough noise to attract every walker within a ten-mile radius.

“Get your shit together.” He hissed as V-Lin tripped over his own shoelaces while carrying a box of explosives.

The one thing he was right about was the surplus stores underground bunkers. He found three that had not been cleared out yet. They were full of rifles, bullets, grenades, and even a few landmines. It was like Christmas had come early, or it would have been if his team would figure out what the hell they were doing.

“Miles, take this.” He handed off the last box to the other man. “You and V go back to the truck. Check the trailer and make sure everything is secure. I’m gonna make another round to see if we missed anything.”

They couldn’t afford to leave anything behind. It was all too valuable to let go. He didn’t know if they would be able to come back, so they had to take everything they could haul now.
He pushed some dirt around the entrance to the last bunker they cleared out, trying to make it appear as if no one had been there. He kept his eyes peeled to the ground, hoping to see an odd glint of metal peeking through the grass that would lead him to another cavern full of goodies.

It was his own fault, really. He was so focused on his task that he wasn’t on the lookout for a threat. Walkers didn’t count. He would hear those ones coming long before they got to him. It was other people he had to worry about. Those are the ones who could quiet their footsteps, the ones you would not know were behind you until it was too late.

He was ambushed from the side, smacked to the ground, the wind knocked out of him. He slammed his elbow back, nailing someone in the gut, causing them to grunt and roll away. He pulled his gun from his thigh holster, rolled, and fired once, landing a hit to the knee of the guy still on the ground beside him. He didn’t have a chance to do much else before he was shot with something that pricked the skin of his neck, so most definitely not a bullet.

The last thing he saw as the edges of his eyes darkened, was the panicked faces of Miles and V-Lin in the windows of the 4x4 before they sped off into the distance.

On the plus side of things, he had not been eaten yet, the wound on his head had stopped bleeding, and they had given him back his shirt, before leaving him on the damp concrete floor of a storeroom. On the downside, he was freezing, he hurt like hell, and he was still going to become someone’s meal.

He curled up in the furthest and darkest corner of the room when the handle of the door jiggled, signaling someone was about to come in. He wasn’t sure what he could do if someone tried to pull him out and drag him off to the fate they chose for him. He could try to fight, it would be as useless endeavor at this point, but he had no intention of going down easily.

The pair that entered were about his age, if not a little younger, and were half-carrying/half-dragging in a body that they proceeded to drop at his feet. They didn’t say a word, didn’t even spare a glance in his direction. They were the picture of cool, calm, and composed as they sauntered back out, closing and locking the door behind them.

He took a hesitant look at the person lying not far from him. His face was not visible given the dimness of the room, but the man’s right arm was bathed in a strip of light coming from under the door. The sleeve of his t-shirt was bunched up far enough to show the bottom of a tattoo on his bicep.

“Stoner Cheese? Stoner Cheese?” It was an odd thing to have inked onto your body. It did seem familiar to him, though. “Who the fuck woul-Juice!”

He scrambled over to the still form, flipping him onto his back. Juice’s face was clear as day, as was the bruise forming on his cheek. He reached out two fingers to check for a pulse, letting relief flood him as he found one.

“Juice,” He patted the older man’s chest gently, not knowing the extent of his injuries. “Juice, wake up. Come on.”

“Who…?” His eyes flickered open slowly as he regained consciousness.

“Hey. Let’s get you up.” He gripped Juice’s shoulders and levered him up until he was in a sitting position. “You okay?”
"Stiles?" Juice’s eyes went wide as he seemed to realize who he was with. "You’re here?"

"Yep." He thought that much was obvious. "Do you wanna know where here is?"

"Yeah."

"Me too." Given their captors conversation earlier, he assumed they were in Beacon Hills or near it, but he could not be sure without visual confirmation. "You want the good news or the bad news first?"

"Give me the good news." Huh, he would have saved the good stuff for last.

"You’re alive." Under the circumstances, it was debatable whether that was good news or not. "And you have excellent company."

"Sure." The sides of Juice’s mouth twitched up in a smile. "What’s the bad news?"

"Well," How could he put it in a way that was both dramatic and humorous? "These guys are hungry and we look mighty tasty."

"Is that a euphemism?" The older man scrunched up his nose.

"Yes and no." It could be one or the other, possibly both. "They’re keeping me for a future meal. I think they are giving you to someone named Tully in exchange for supplies in Red Bluff. The way they talked, I assume Tully has a refined taste for pretty men."

"Fuck." He scrubbed a hand down his face before taking a closer look at Stiles. "Why is there blood all over your shirt?"

"I got the resident sadist as my welcoming committee." The wounds he left had not stopped bleeding as of yet. "Where’d they pick you up?"

"Millville." Guess that answered the question about if he was the one the other members of the group were out looking for. "I was on a run with the prospects. What about you?"

"I was stupid enough to try and sleep in an abandon shack out in the sticks." On the off chance that he lived, he would not be making that mistake again.

"Were you with others? Do they have-"

"I was on my own." Just as he had been since Washington. "I had a group, my friends, for a little while, but they’re gone now."

"Dead?" He had no way of knowing that for sure. It was always a possibility.

"Just gone." He ducked his head, suddenly finding his shoes very interesting. "It’s just me now."

"No, it’s not." Juice placed a comforting hand on his knee. "Your brothers are-"

"Don’t say it. Don’t." He could not listen to that, not now. "Just because they were alive when you last saw them doesn’t mean they still are."

"It’s still not just you." The older man said again. "I’m stuck here with you. Do I count?"

"Yeah. You count." He assured him. "Now make yourself useful. Help me come up with a plan that gets us the hell out of here."
“Useful? I’ve got something useful.” He leaned down to peel back a loose piece of rubber on the heel of his boot, sticking his fingers inside and removing a scalpel. “It doesn’t matter how thorough the search is, they always forget to check for secret compartments.”

“Nice.” He should have thought of that. “There’s at least four of them out there.”

“And they have sleeper darts.” He rubbed a spot on his neck unconsciously. “One of them is injured. He’s got a bum knee.”

“How do you know?”

“I shot him in it.” Oh, well, good to know. “If we can find where they stashed our stuff, then I might have an exit strategy.”

“Care to fill me in on that?” He didn’t want to go out there not knowing the plan.

“I may have had a few grenades on me.” Those could guarantee their way out. “I was on a weapons and ammunitions run. I stashed a few in my jacket in case things got hairy.”

“We’re not leaving here without our stuff.” And, honestly, that had nothing to do with the grenades. “They took some things from me and I’m not leaving this compound without them.”

“Okay. So let’s figure out how we get from here to there.”

The tension was running high around the clubhouse. It was causing their tempers to flare, making them snap at each other. They had already broken up a dozen fights and had to separate people between the clubhouse and garage so they could cool off.

It was the worry putting them on edge. Three of their brothers were out on a run they probably would not come back from. They couldn’t even try to be positive about it. They knew failure was the only possible outcome, but they had to hope the men out there could pull a rabbit out of their hat and surprise them all.

“You should go lay down for a bit, baby.” Is mother suggested even as she set a fresh beer in front of him. “It’s late. They won’t be back for hours.”

“I’m fine.” He couldn’t sleep, he had tried already.

“Jax,” Tig knocked a fist against the office door. “Boys are back.”

“Already?” It was too soon for them to be back. They must have turned around before they even made it to surplus store.

“Come on.” There was something grave in Tig’s expression that made him fear the worst.

He followed the other man out, his mother hot on his heels. The 4x4 was parked in the middle of the lot, with a large trailer attached to the back of it. The trailer had not been there when they left, which made it seem as if the mission was a success. That did not explain why Chibs had Miles and V-Lin shoved up against the truck with a lethal look in his eye.

“Where is Juice?” The Scot snarled in the prospects faces. “Tell me.”

“He’s gone.”
“What does that mean?” Jax pushed through the crowd of Sons to question the prospects himself. “What happened?”

“We were loading up what was left of the stuff and he was attacked.” Miles flicked a gaze to V-Lin, who nodded, as if they were checking their story. “We couldn’t do anything. They had him.”

“What had him?” Dead zones were hotspots for a number of different things. “Walkers? Scavengers?”

“There was nothing we could do.” V repeated what was already said. “We’re sorry.”

“Where’s his body?” Chibs asked, not letting up an inch.

“We had to lea-”

“You just left his body out there?” Piney snapped at them, face red with anger.

They had a rule they always followed. You never leave one of your own behind, even if you were only bringing back a body. They dragged Clay back from Stockton when he was bitten during their escape from prison. They searched rows of bodies outside a refugee center to find Unser's body and bring him home to Charming. You did not leave the people you loved to be consumed by the dead, they deserved better than that.

“We didn’t have a choice.”

“There’s always a choice.”

It was decided that Juice would be the one to wield the scalpel for several reasons. One being that it was his scalpel. Two being that Stiles was more or less sidelined from close-quarters combat thanks to his pre-existing injuries. He was only to physically engage if he had no other choice. Three, Juice was more experienced in that particular area.

How it all went down really depended on who came through the door next. They would attempt to subdue them first, knock them unconscious, and make a break for it. If that plan did not work, then they would slice open the carotid artery with the scalpel, let them drop and bleed out on the storage room floor while they made their escape. They were counting on only one of them coming in, but if more did and were packing heavy artillery then they would have to make on the spot adjustments to the plan.

Apparently, luck was working in their favor, because it was Brunski who walked in. He was holding the dart gun, but he never got the chance to use it. Juice was on him the moment he crossed the threshold, pinning him to the far well. Brunski tried to fight pack, attempted to use the gun to knock Juice off him, but his struggles stopped when Juice shoved the scalpel in to his throat. Stiles took the dart gun for himself as Brunski’s body sank to the floor.

“One down.” Juice muttered, an expression of guilt flickering over his features.

Juice wasn’t like the other Sons. The horrible shit he was forced to do sat heavily on his heart. Even killing someone who was pure evil would weigh on his soul. It was just part of who he was. It didn’t stop him from making the hard choice, it just wasn’t as easy for him to let it go as it was for the others.
“It’s supposed to make you feel bad.” He reasoned as Brunski’s blood pooled beneath their feet. “It’s when it feels good that you know you have a problem, that you are the problem.”

“You know this from experience?” He would let the condescending tone slide this once, and only because Juice had no idea what kind of things Stiles had done since they last saw each other.

“Yes.” It wasn’t a lot of experience, but it was enough for him to learn a thing or two about himself. “We can swap if you want. You can have the dart gun and I’ll take the scalpel.”

“You’re going to let me have the gun?” Juice called bullshit, obviously seeing how Stiles held it closely to himself. “Same rules apply. I go hand-to-hand if I need to with this and you put people to sleep with that. You seem to favor it.”

“I miss my rifle.” This was the closest he was going to get to it for now. “We neutralize the threat. Find our shit. Get the fuck out.”

“Pretty much, yes.” Juice crouched down to get into Brunski’s pockets, removing four darts. “Here’s your extra ammo. I think that’s a one shot.”

“Great.” He pocketed the items and made sure he had one loaded and ready to go. “Quick question, how neutral are we doing this?”

“What do you mean?”

“Are we just knocking them out or are we putting them down?” Killing Brunski kind of complicated the situation.

“It depends on how bad it gets out there.” Which meant knocking out was optimal but they might have to resort to deadlier methods. “We should get going before they come looking for him. Stay behind me, but stay close, and be as quiet as you can.”

“Well.” In the ideal situation, they would be miles away from this hellhole before anyone knew they were gone.

Stiles had five darts in total, and there were only three men and one woman in the group that had them, that they were aware of, and one of them was already on the floor dead. That left three of them unaccounted for, Garrett, Violet, and No Name.

No Name was down the hall to the right, coming out of one room as they were exiting the storeroom. Stiles put a dart in his neck before he even realized he wasn’t alone. They decided to check for their lost items in the room No Name had come out of first, hoping the search would be over quickly. It turned out to be an empty kitchen.

“Is that a…a hand?” Stiles really wanted to believe it wasn’t, but there was no denying there was a human hand in a roasting pan on top of the stove, that looked as if it had been baked. “Jesus Christ.”

“There’s the rest of her, I think.” Juice nodded toward a dead blonde girl lying on a slab in the corner of the room, who was missing a leg as well. “It looks like they held her here for a while.”

“Oh no.” There was something very recognizable about the girl. He had to take a few steps closer to get a better look just to be sure. “Goddamn it.”

“Stiles,” Juice wrapped his fingers around his arm to keep him from going far. “Did you know her?”
“Her name's Heather.” They had grown up together.

“There’s nothing we can do for her now.” He appreciated that Juice didn’t offer him some platitude, say he was sorry or that she was in a better place. He hated shit like that.

“I know.” Her fight was over now. Theirs was not. “Let’s check another room.”

They made through two more rooms down the long hall, which turned out to be a broom closet and a makeshift infirmary. If it hadn’t been for the body they found in the kitchen, they might have left the medicine alone, but they figured these people didn’t deserve it so they found a backpack in a cabinet and filled it to the brim. What they were really looking for was in the last room at the end of the hall.

They got in without a problem, just as they had every other room. The only difference was, on the other side of this room, by another door, were two guards. It would not have mattered if they hadn’t heard Juice and Stiles enter, but unfortunately they had. Their semi-automatics were aimed in their direction the second they made it through the doorway.

They were in some kind of standoff, waiting to see who was going to do what. It gave Stiles the time he needed to figure them out. One had been a security guard at some point, if showed in the way he held himself. The other was anxious and twitchy, not sure of what he was supposed to be doing. He was either new or really bad at his job.

“Freeze.” Former rent-a-cop ordered. “We will sho-“

Stiles was quick to put a sleeper dart in his forehead before he could finish his sentence. Twitchy beside him looked a little nauseous, as if Stiles had just killed his buddy not knocked him out. He hesitated, didn’t immediately start shooting, which allowed Stiles time to reload his weapon.

“All right, man. I’m going to let you decide how this plays out. You can leave or you can –“ He leveled his gun at them in response. “Damn it.”

He was a little nicer to Twitchy, he shot him in the thigh and watched him drop like a sack of potatoes. He glanced between Twitchy and Rent-a-Cop and wondered how many were out there. The building wasn’t huge, but they were packing some heavy artillery for it to be a small operation they were running.

“Find your shit.” Juice waved a hand at the rows of tables surrounding them, covered in things the scavenger cannibals had taken off others. “Take what we can carry and use. I don’t think anyone’s coming back for it.”

“We need to be quick. We can’t be sure they didn’t sound some kind of alarm.” They didn’t even know how long the sleep darts lasted.

They both took separate sides to begin their search. They grabbed pistols and extra clips, they were easier to carry. It was so nice that they kept all the crap in the same room. Stiles found his knife, jacket, and his dads badge pretty quickly, tossed haphazardly in a pile of what looked like junk. Juice let out a soft ‘yes’ when he came across the grenades he had come in with, along with a few flashbangs. There was just one thing Stiles couldn’t seem to find

“Hey, do you- have you seen a, uh, a ring? A gold ring?” He rummaged through different piles of jewelry, looking for the right one but coming up empty. “It’s inscribed-“

“I’ve got it. It was on my side. Here.” Juice handed it over quickly, as if he knew how much it meant to him. “Is this the right one? It has your parent’s names in the inscription.”
“Yes.” He squeezed the ring in his palm. “It-it’s the right one. Thank you.”

“Do we have everything?” They both did a glance over of what they had acquired before realizing they had all they could carry, then they turned to the door Twitchy and Rent-a-Cop had been guarding. “Do we want to go out that door or find another?”

“Might as well try that door.” What harm could it to right.

Stiles had dropped the dart gun, not having use for it anymore. He and Juice both had one round in the chamber of their pistols, and full mags, plus back-up clips in their pockets. Juice wore the backpack full of meds, and handed off one of two grenades and a flashbang to Stiles before they twisted the knob to the door that led outdoors.

They might have underestimated how big this operation was. For such a small building there sure were a lot of people ambling about outside. There seemed to be a barbecue going on. Stiles was pretty sure he saw Mr. Harris and his old English teacher Ms. Blake out there.

“I count twenty people in all.” Juice whispered as they took cover, one of them behind the door and one behind the wall beside it. “Think they’re all cannibals?”

“Have you seen what’s on their plates?” There was meat and absolutely no evidence of it being anything other than human. The grill was visible from Stiles position, and he could clearly see a human leg in the process of being cooked. “I don’t think this is our way out.”

“Well, I don’t think they’re going to give us much of a choice.” Juice grabbed him by the arm and forced him to take a few steps back with him when all eyes turned on them in a very creepy manner. “We can run, but there are more of them then there are of us and they know their way around.”

“I’m not going to lose any sleep at night for taking out a few cannibals. Think about how many innocent people they’ve killed.” Fuck, there were children’s toys in the room they were in but no children around. These people were barely human. “We need an exit. Let’s make one. Maybe use the flashbang first.”

“Okay.” Juice nodded along as the crowd began to murmur before the lot of them started stalking toward them. “One flashbang that way. We have to hope the other way isn’t blocked off by more people.”

“We do have two grenades that can physically make us an exit.” He pulled the pin on the flashbang and tossed it out the door before grabbing Juice’s hand and making a break in the other direction, a chorus of coughs and angry screams following them.

They made it out of the room in time for Juice to drop his grenade in the middle of the hall, hoping to prevent anyone from getting to them. They made it to the main room, where Stiles had been tortured the previous afternoon, before the loud boom and shock of the grenade reverberated through the building, knocking them on their asses. Stiles could barely hear or see a damn thing after his head was knocked back against the concrete floor, reopening his head wound. He tried shaking it off as Juice pulled him off the ground and they started for the only other exit in sight.

“Throw yours once we hit the door. We don’t want anyone following us out.”

Stiles did as he was told as soon as they were safely out the door, pulling the grenade from his jacket pocket and tossing it back into the building to further complicate the cannibals day, or possibly kill a whole bunch of them, whichever worked, really. They didn’t make it very far before
Juice led them behind a tipped over pick-up sitting on what used to be a patch of grass. He shoved Stiles to the ground and covered his body to shield him from the debris of the explosion. One grenade was enough to bring down a section of the building, but two brought the entire thing down.

“My knight in shining armor.” Stiles coughed out, his body constricting in pain at the weight of Juice on top of him. “You okay?”

“I think so.” Juice seemed to realize the position he was in was hindering Stiles ability to breathe. He jumped to his feet and held out a hand to him. “Are you okay?”

“No worse than I was earlier.” He took Juice’s hand and used it to leverage himself up and into a standing position. “Grenades, man, very efficient.”

“Yeah.” He looked over his shoulder at the ruins of the building. “We don’t know if that was all of them, and that blast is going to draw every walker for miles. We need to figure out where we are so we can leave.”


“That’s not a good thing. Beacon Hills is a dead zone hotspot.” Thank you, Mr. Ortiz, for stating the obvious. “We need to find a car and get the hell out of here.”

“I know where we can find one.” He had to leave Roscoe behind when they evacuated, but that didn’t mean he just left her in the garage at his dad’s house. No, he took special care to make sure his jeep was safe. “It’s a long walk.”

The adrenaline rush wore off about the same time they hit the tree line of the preserve. The bone deep exhaustion, the cuts, bruises, and injuries they incurred at the cannibals warehouse or prior to that were making themselves known. It was taking its toll, making them feel run down and weary.

Juice could see that the blood loss Stiles had suffered from his head wound and whatever the ‘resident sadist’ had done to him, was quickly catching up to him. His movements were almost lethargic. He was breathing harder, and it wasn’t from their trek through the woods. He kept bringing his shaking hands up to his head, as if he wanted to rub away the pain but knew it would only have the opposite effect.

“Hey, you, uh,” The only thing he could do to help Stiles was to try to take his mind off it. “You gonna tell me what you meant earlier?”

“About?”

“Having experience in killing feeling good?” It wasn’t the best topic choice, but it was the only one he could think of.

“You want the long version or the highlight reel?”

“We’ve got time. Give me the full story.”

“When the evacuation centers failed, we headed north. We settled down for a while in Washington, near Port Angeles. There was a house on the cliffs overlooking the ocean. It seemed like a good
idea at the time. We fished in the sea and hunted in the woods. We only went into town if we needed to.” He assumed ‘we’ meant Stiles and the group he had been with. “We had a few run-ins with scavengers while in town. They would demand our supplies and we would give them up just to stay alive. I guess they figured if we would give them up so readily that we must have a stockpile back at our camp. They followed us up there.”

“What happened?” He knew the short answer. Stiles had been with a group and now he was alone. The scavengers had obviously attacked.

“They waited in the woods, trying to determine our setup. They shot flaming arrows into the windows of the house one morning. That’s how we woke up. It was all very medieval.” It was one hell of a wakeup call that was for sure. “They had guns too. They yelled that they would shoot the place up unless they got what they wanted. It was decided that my dad, being the sheriff, would go out and try to negotiate. I didn’t like that plan.”

Of course he did not like it. It would put his father in danger. Anyone who knew Stiles knew how much his dad meant to him.

“I grabbed my rifle and went to the second floor landing. I got my gun set up at one of the windows and I looked through the scope. I lined up my shot just in time to see the scavenger’s leader shoot my dad in the head.” Stiles face remained hard and his voice steady. “I pulled the trigger on my rifle without blinking. The leader was dead before my dad’s body hit the ground. His buddies weren’t expecting that, which allowed me to take out two of them before they realized where the gunfire was coming from. They started shooting back, but it didn’t distract me. I did not move from that spot until they were all dead.”

“What was your group doing?”

“The house was on fire from the arrows, so they were grabbing what they could. They retreated to the vehicles once I killed the last one.” In other words, nothing. They had done nothing to help Stiles. “I waited, kept my eyes trained on the forest, in case there were more scavengers hiding. I waited until the group was all loaded into their cars and they were calling for me to hurry up. The fire was pretty bad by the time I made it downstairs, the building integrity was compromised. It all came crumbling down before I reached the front door.”

“Were you hurt?” How could he have not been hurt?

“I was pinned down by a support beam from the ceiling.” He made a gesture from his left shoulder, across his chest, and to his right shoulder. “My hands got some nasty burns too, when I had to use them to lift it off.”

“No one helped you?”

“No one was there to help me.”

“Your group left you behind?” Was that why he had said they were just gone?

“My friends.” Stiles corrected. “They didn’t leave me behind. They thought I was dead.”

That was a copout if he ever heard one, but he wouldn’t call Stiles out on it.

“How long ago was this?” It was obvious it had been more than a little while, it showed in how hoarse Stiles voice was from lack of use. He had been on his own for some time, with no one to talk to but himself.
“Well, I holed up in an old lighthouse a few towns over to heal up. I had to stay there through
winter. It was a really bad winter.” Stiles looked down at his fingers as if they held the answer to
how long he had been traveling by himself. “It was safer to keep moving, so when spring came I
started out on the old forest trails. I stayed close the coast, but the scavengers have taken those
towns too, so I had to go east for a while.”

“How long, Stiles?”

“Um, counting the lighthouse,” Anything after the house on the cliffs counted, yeah. “A year,
maybe longer.”

“Jesus.”

“Walker.” Stiles blurted out, confusing Juice for a moment before he nearly ran smack dab into
one.

“Shit.” He pushed it away with what energy he had left before shoving a knife into its rotten skull.
They could not use their guns in the forest, they reverberated. They had to stick to blades and hope
they were quiet enough to be ignored.

“Get enough of that walker blood on you and you can walk through a hoard undetected.” The
younger man claimed. “I learned that in Beaverton.”

“Handy skill.” He decided he did not want to know how Stiles learned that.

“How did you end up on your own?” Stiles questioned, tripping over a tree branch. “You said you
were with the prospects, but they weren’t brought in with you.”

“They took off in my 4x4 the moment things got a little dangerous.” If they made it back to
Charming, he would knock their teeth in for that. “They’re okay with walkers. It’s anything else
that freaks them out. I got tackled by some little bastard and the only thing I saw was my trucks
tires kicking up dust.”

“Prospects are pussies. Toughen them up or cut them loose.” If he were anyone else, he would ask
what ‘cut them loose’ meant, but in this case, he assumed it meant stripping their patches. “Letting
you get scooped up by scavengers makes them short on brains and loyalty. They should have
backed you up.”

“Why didn’t your friends back you up?” They were in the house, packing their things, instead of
defending their camp. “Why didn’t they fight back against the scavengers?”

“Oh, they have a strict no-kill policy.” Stiles snorted derisively. “They’ll kill walkers, but that’s it.
A living being gets to live no matter what crimes they may have committed. They get to walk free
because the True Alpha commands it.”

“True Alpha?” He knew about werewolves, knew Stiles had ended up in the middle of a pack
during his sophomore year of high school, but he had never heard of a True Alpha.

“Scott. It happened after the dead started walking among us.” He waved the title off completely.
“He believes all lives are precious. What those scavengers did to my dad would not change Scott’s
mind. He would have made us let them go, and I was not about to let that happen. As soon as they
touched my dad, I knew they wouldn’t be walking away.”

“You said killing felt good.” He brought the conversation back to the original point. “There’s a
difference between feeling enraged and feeling good.”
“I didn’t feel anything when I did it. I was calm in a way I had never been before.” That was a side effect of the rage. “I stayed at the cliff house long enough to bury my dad. The fire was still burning, so I dragged the scavengers bodies into the flames. I was watching them burn and I felt bad.”

“They why tell me you felt good?” He was contradicting himself.

“I didn’t feel bad about killing them. I felt bad about making it so quick.” He chuckled darkly to himself. “One shot was too simple, too easy. They should have suffered more.”

“It doesn’t mean you felt good about it.” It just meant that the need for vengeance did not fix the damage that had been done. “Revenge didn’t make you feel better about losing your dad. It didn’t make that pain go away. Torturing them wouldn’t have helped either.”

“Not in the long run, no, but for a few minutes I would have felt really good listening to them scream.” That might be true, but at some point, he would realize the blood on his hands could not be washed away with soap and water.

“If I didn’t know you, I might find you a little terrifying.” He did know Stiles, though. He knew the guilt would eat at him, even if the people he killed deserved it.

“Just a little?”

“A little being slightly more terrified than I was when I found a half-naked picture of myself in your porn stash.” The comment succeeded in lightening the mood and making Stiles nearly face plant.

“Y-You found, uh, a what? In where? I-In my, uh…” He was fucking adorable when he was flustered. “When would you even-”

“We’ve come up to Beacon Hills a few times to look for you. We’ve gone through your house, searched it top to bottom to see if maybe you left a message somewhere.” He couldn’t just leave a note on a coffee table, looters would find it. “Tig found the vanilla stuff under your mattress. The kinky stuff, including my picture, I found in the heating vent.”

“Kinky stuff…”

“No judgment. We’ve all got our special interests.” Some of he and Stiles’ even overlapped. “I am curious as to where you got that picture of me.”

“I, uh, I-I don’t have a good answer.”

“Why did you have it?”

“As if you don’t know.” Stiles scoffed as his cheeks flushed crimson. “I’ve had a crush on your forever. Everybody knows this.”

“Huh.”

“‘Huh,’ he says.” Stiles mumbled as he glanced at something in the distance. “We’re here.”

“What the hell is that?” Aside from a debilitated house that looked like it had burned down years ago.

“The old Hale House. Roscoe’s in the tunnels just down that way.” The younger man pointed to a
downward slope in the dirt not far from them. “The battery and spark plugs are in the house. I kept them separate on the off chance that someone would stumble upon Roscoe. I figured they would leave her alone if she didn’t run.”

“And Roscoe is…?”

“My jeep.”

“You have a jeep?”

“While you guys were locked up I got my license and my dad gave me his old jeep.” That must have happened before world went to shit.

“And you call her Roscoe?”

“You call yourself Juice,” Stiles said slowly as if he were an idiot.

“Why Roscoe? It’s not a name you hear every day, not in this century anyway.” Not that it wasn’t a nice name, just an odd choice.

“I know, that’s why I like it.” He quirked up his lips in a smile. “I’m not really up for driving. Can you handle a stick?”

“Is that an honest question or another euphemism?” He teased lightheartedly.

“Both.” Stiles sent him a flirtatious wink. “Answer the question.”

“Don’t worry.” He knocked his shoulders against the younger man’s. “I know my way around a stick very well.”

“Euphemism?” He asked hopefully.

“Yes and no.” He would let Stiles decide how he wanted to take that one. “Let’s get back on task, getting Roscoe running and getting the hell out of here.”

“Where are we going?” He was a little put off by the question, he figured Stiles already knew the answer.

“Charming.”

“I went to Charming when all this started.” His voice wavered as he spoke. “It was overrun.”

“We took it back.” It was a lot of work, but somehow they managed it. “The clubhouse and TM. We’ve been working on a few other places.”

“Wow.” Stiles muttered under his breath. “Did you guys really come up here to look for me? More than once?”

“Every time we got close to Beacon Hills, we would stop in and see if you came back.” If was almost funny how the one time he didn’t enter Beacon Hills on his own volition was the one time he actually found Stiles. “None of us believed you were dead.”

“Thank you.” Stiles leaned in to brush a kiss across his cheek. “For looking for me, for not… giving up.”

“Don’t thank me yet.” He didn’t have to thank him at all, it was what friends and family did. “We
still have to make it through the dead zone. The two hour drive is close to five now, and at night it’s closer to eight or nine.”

“Long night ahead of us.”

“Normally I wouldn’t take the chance of going at night.” It was increasingly dangerous with unforeseen obstacles, scavengers, and walkers. “Under the circumstances, I think we need to get there as quickly as possible, and that means taking some risks.”

“What circumstances?”

“You’re still bleeding, Stiles, on your chest and your head.” The head wound was the one he was really worried about. “I’m pretty sure the only reason you’re still standing is by sheer force of will. You need medical attention. You could have an infection, head trauma-“

“I get it.” He held up a hand to stop Juice’s onslaught of words. “Blood loss and head trauma are the reason I am letting you drive. I’m dizzy, I’ve got a migraine that won’t quit, and I feel like I’m going to puke up all my internal organs.”

“So, let’s get a move on.” It was enough they would have to take some serious detours to ensure they weren’t followed.

“That would be best, yeah.”

They did not wear kuttes on runs. They were too identifiable. If someone were scouting the group they had out, the kuttes would easily give away their location. It also served as a reminder for those they had lost, the ones who didn’t make it back from runs.

Juice’s kutte was draped over the reaper on the chapel table. It was all they had left of him. The Sons had all gathered around it, mourning the dead, or trying to. It still didn’t feel real, there had not been enough time for it to really sink in, and they couldn’t let it until they got things sorted out.

“We need to inventory everything Miles and V-Lin brought back.” In one respect, the mission was a success, they had what they needed, but they had lost a man to do it, which made it a failure. “And we need to figure out how to proceed from here on out in regards to them.”

“The prospects do not go out on runs anymore, unless two or more of us are with them.” Opie implemented a new rule.

“I second that.” Tig raised a hand. “Something ain’t right about what happened to Juice. They’re keeping something from us.”

“I know.” Jax scrubbed a hand down his face. “They’re holding something back.”

“They shouldn’t be wearing those kuttes if we can’t trust them.” Piney grumbled, taking a long pull from the bottle of whiskey that seemed to permanently reside in his hand.

“Let’s give it a few days before we decide anything.” They couldn’t afford to make any rash decisions. “Maybe their tongues will loosen up and we’ll get the truth.”

“I can get them talking.” Happy glared menacingly at the doors, knowing the prospects were out there having beers while Juice was lying dead somewhere.
“I know you can.” If Miles and V-Lin didn’t open their mouths soon, then he would set Hap loose on them. “We give it a few days and see what happens. Do we need to vote on this?”

“No.”

He put his foot down hard on the accelerator as they passed the Welcome to Charming sign. It was more about Stiles than it was his eagerness to get home. The younger man had folded in on himself, head resting on the passenger side window. His body was racked with tremors and he was sweating profusely, a sure sign of a fever and possible sign of infection. His breath was coming out in short puffs and every few seconds he let out a small whine of pain.

“Hey,” He took his hand off the gearshift to pat Stiles thigh. “We’re in Charming. We’ll be at the clubhouse in no time.”

“My grandfather’s buried here.” He mentioned sadly, sounding far less coherent than he had been earlier in the trip. “He’s not far from Thomas.”

“What?”

“My grandfather is buried here.” Stiles said again, not making any more sense than he had the first time. “I didn’t get to take my dad home. I had to bury him at the cliff house. I should have found a way to take him home, so he could be with my mom.”

“If you had tried to take him back to Beacon Hills, you would have been killed.” If it wasn’t the scavengers, it would have been the walkers, or a number of other things. “I didn’t really know your dad, but I don’t think he would have wanted you to risk your life to bury him. He would have wanted you to survive.”

Stiles did not have a response for that, which made him a little wary. He pulled his gaze from the road for moment to really look at the younger man. Stiles eyes were unfocused, lids fluttering in an effort to remain open. His was a sickly shade of pale that made him appear almost ghostlike.

“You gotta stay awake.” Awake was better, passing out was bad, especially if he had a concussion. “Just until we get to the clubhouse, then Tara will fix you up.”

“Don’t!” Stiles snapped at him. “Told you not to t-tell me who was alive.”

“Get over it.” He was confident they were still alive, even if Stiles was not. He had not been gone long enough for shit to hit the fan. “She’s going to need some information from you. What happened to your head? They hit you with something?”

“Two-by-four, I think.” With enough force behind the swing that could do some serious damage. “That’s what it felt like.”

“When did it happen?”

“Uh, last night? No. I was with you last night. Everything’s all muddled together. I don’t….” He made a frustrated noise in the back of this throat. “I-It was the night before last, it had to be.”

“Do you have any other injuries? Other than ones I already know about?”

“No.” He began to shake his head but regretted the decision when he grunted in pain. “I don’t think
so. Are we almost there?”

“Yes.” He took a swift left turn off Main Street and onto Fairfield road.

The clubhouse was not always the last business on the far end of the street. They had put up a wall barrier to cut off access from the other side, allowing them to control who came and went. You could only enter with a vehicle through the main gate, but for safety purposes, there was an exit you could take out the back if you were going on foot.

“Okay. We’re here.” Juice stopped just short of the main gate, letting his eyes scan the guard post and finding no one there. “Shift change.”

“We have to wait for someone to come out and open it?”

“No, I can open it. It’s a combo lock accessible from both sides.” It made it easier to get in and out with little fuss. “I’ll be right back.”

“Take this,” Stiles removed his knife from the glove box and handed it over. “There are at least ten walkers between you and the gate. Take ‘em out quiet.”

“This isn’t my first time.” There were five walkers, actually, but if Stiles was seeing ten then he really needed to get to Tara sooner rather than later.

He smacked one walker with the car door as he opened it then quickly shoved a blade in its forehead while kicking the door shut. He pulled his knife free and repeated the process, minus the door action, with the remaining walkers, before jogging toward the gate. He jimmed the lock, trying to make as little noise as possible, until he could see the dial to input the numbers. He was just about to put in the combination when a shot rang out a little too close for comfort.

“Get away from the gate!” A familiar voice boomed from above.

Juice held a hand up toward the jeep, signaling for Stiles to stay put, then gazed up at the guard post to see that Miles standing there with a rifle pointed down at him. He stepped out of the shadows, assuming the prospect could not see him properly, and held his hands up in surrender for effect.

“Miles, it’s me.” Even in the darkness, he could see the prospect’s eyes go wide in shock. “It’s Juice. Stand down.”

“What are you doing here?” Seriously?

“I live here.” SAMCRO and TM had been his home a hell of a lot longer than they had been Miles’. “Open the gate.”

“I don’t know if I should.” What in the fuck was that supposed to mean?

“Open the gate or I will.” He was not in the mood for this shit.

“I’ll shoot you if you go near the lock again.” Miles threatened, gripping his gun a little tighter.

“Why the hell would you do that?” When did he become the bad guy here?

“How do I know you’re not here to hurt us?” He had no reason to hurt anyone inside. The only reason he was outside the gates to begin with was to protect them, to obtain the ammunition supply that would ensure their survival for the foreseeable future. “V-Lin and me, we left you, right?”
You’re here for payback.”

“Not my style, idiot.” He wasn’t there for retribution. ”Open th-“

“Juice!” He and Miles jerked their heads in the direction of the jeep, where Stiles had moved to the driver’s side and was sticking his head out the window. “Get out of the way. Move to the right.”

“Why?” He probably didn’t want to know the answer to that.

“Get out of the car!” Miles yelled but Stiles did not pay him any mind.

“Get out of the way, Juice.” Well, he didn’t have to be told a third time.

The gate in front of Teller-Morrow used to be a flimsy chain-link. It had obviously been upgraded and reinforced. There was some kind of platform, a walkway, at the top that allowed the person on guard to move back and forth, to keep them busy instead of simply standing around. It was a good idea, though Stiles had every intention of making them regret it.

He wasn’t planning to slam through the gate, as a way to open it. They needed it to keep the compound safe. No, he was only going to give it a little love tap.

He waited until Juice was safely out of the way before carefully placing his foot on the gas. He did not let the gunshot fired at him or Juice’s outraged shout deter him from gently knocking the gate with his bumper. The force was enough for it to become unstable, to shake, making Miles lose his balance and tumble off and onto the road just a few feet from the jeep.

Juice stood a little shell-shocked off the side as Stiles all but fell out of the car, body weak from his injuries. He made sure to grab his gun off the seat as he did so, not wanting to be left unprotected with walkers around. Miles cries of pain would only draw more of them.

“Juice, open the gate.” He ordered as he gave Roscoe a once-over and found a bullet lodged in the driver side door.

“Probably woke up the entire club with that racket.” Juice commented but worked the lock anyway.

The prospect was lying in a crumpled mess. He probably had a broken leg and a fractured arm given the height he fell from and the way he landed. He was still trying to reach for his gun though, which had ended up not far from him on the ground.

“I can let go of you shooting at me, but not you shooting at my jeep.” He could have kicked the rifle out of his reach, but honestly, he didn’t have the energy or the coordination. And he was pissed, so that didn’t help the situation. Putting a bullet in Miles good hand was much more effective anyhow. “Now we’re even.”

“Stiles!” Juice chastised and leveled him with a what the fuck expression.

“Don’t ‘Stiles’ me. He’s lucky that bullet didn’t end up in his head, considering how blurry my vision is right now.” He scowled and waved a hand toward the gate. “Just get it open.”

“Tada.” Juice quipped and pulled the gate open, revealing several Sons, all with guns drawn and at the ready, running for the gate, only to stop suddenly at the scene.
“Juice?” The name was echoed by more than one man wearing a kutte.

“Stiles…” Jax breathed out in disbelief.

“You should get your guy before he becomes walker chow.” Stiles gestured to Miles. “Strip his patch. He’s doesn’t deserve to wear it.”

Part of him wanted to make a break for his jeep at the sight of the club members. He was anxious, unsure of himself, unsure if he could trust his mind. Juice must have sensed his trepidation, his urge to run, because he was at his side in a second. He wrapped his fingers around Stiles wrist to lead him to the group.

“Stiles-“

“Someone is fixing my jeep.” He cut Jax off to inform them. “The bullet is not an acceptable decal with that paint job.”

“Stiles!” Jax was a little harsher than necessary as he grabbed Stiles by the shoulders to capture his attention.

He flinched involuntarily at his brother’s touch, feeling a wave of panic wash over him. His eyes were drawn to where his brother’s fingers connected with the skin of his arm and whatever thoughts he had about this all being a fever-induced hallucination were wiped away. He could feel his brother’s touch, and that proved he was real, that it was not all just in his head. He spent so long believing his family was dead that it was almost too much to have them standing right there in front of him.

“Stiles?” Opie’s voice was softer as he addressed him. “You okay, little brother?”

“I’m tired.” It wasn’t the response they were looking for, but it was the only one he had.

“We’re gonna have Tara take a look at you, clean you up a bit, and then you can sleep, okay?” Jax loosened his grip, choosing to wrap an arm around him instead. “Abel and Thomas are going to be really excited to see you. They’ve been waiting a long time.”

“No! N-not like this, Jax, please.” He had blood and dirt caking almost every part of his body. He would look like a goddamn monster to those boys. “They can’t see me like this.”

“They’re asleep right now.” Good, that was good. “You can see them when you’re feeling better.”

“Let’s get you boys inside.” Chibs suggested. “Someone grab Miles, bring that jeep in, and lock the gate.”

Stiles nerves did not settle by the time they entered the clubhouse, in fact it was only his brother’s hold on him that got him to walk in to begin with. It had changed a bit. There were people scattered about in sleeping bags, at the tables, on cots, some awake and having conversations with one another, and others already down for the night.

“So many.” His throat tightened as he took it all in.

“Stiles?” Jax brought him in closer, forced him to meet his eye rather than the crowd surrounding them. “What is it?”

“So many of them.” He bit his lip nervously and ducked his head, partially hoping the floor would open up and swallow him down.
“He hasn’t been around people in a long time.” Juice kept his voice low, so the entire room did not hear.

“Chapel’s clear. Get these boys patched up in there. They’ll at least have some privacy.” Piney made his way over to them, placing a warm hand on the back of Stiles neck. “All right, son?”

“Yes.” He lied easily but the old man lifted an unimpressed brow at him. “No.”

“You will be.”

Stiles had been steady and strong throughout their captivity and trip to Charming. It was all a front, Juice saw that now. The moment he was in his brothers presence he let it all go. He allowed them to take the weight off his shoulders. He let his emotions, his fear and sadness, come to the surface for the first time in who knows how long, because he knew Jax and Opie would protect him, would care for him.

Tara was caring for him now, Juice was able to watch from his chair in the corner of the room. She had Stiles laid out on the chapel table, it wasn’t the most comfortable surface, but it was flat and wouldn’t jostle the way a bed would. She had cut away his shirt, was examining the damage on his chest with a pensive expression on her face. She had inspected his head wound already, had sighed tiredly, hooked him up to a few IV’s, medicines they had pilfered from St. Thomas after it was abandon, and then continued on with her examination, refusing to tell them anything until she was finished.

“Juicy,” Chibs fingers worked nimbly against his skin, checking for any scrapes or scratches that required more than just peroxide and a bandage. “Did you take a blow to the head too?”

“No. I’m fine.” He was the lucky one. “You should be helping Tara with him.”

It was the third time he had tried to divert Chibs attention to the younger man since Stiles lost consciousness. Tara had barely gotten through the usual ‘can you tell me your name, age, and current president’ questions that were generally asked when someone had a concussion, before the kid had passed out. If Opie hadn’t been standing right next to him he would have hurt himself further by smacking his head on the table.

“She’s got it handled. If she needs help she’ll ask for it.” That was true enough. Tara would not put Stiles at risk by trying to do it alone. “What happened with you and the prospects during the run?”

“I was checking that we hadn’t missed anything. Scavenger jumped me.” He should have been more careful, had someone watching his back. “The prospects got spooked and took off in the truck.”

“They didn’t try to help.” The Scot shot an ugly look to the chapel doors. They had left Miles in the main room by the bar, letting him know he would be last in line to receive first aid. “One scavenger took you down? Getting sloppy there, boy.”

“It was a really big guy.” Honestly, the guy was smaller than him, but took him by surprise. He really did not have to tackle him either. He would have been better off shooting him with the dart from afar. “Who had some equally big friends at the warehouse Stiles and I were held at.”

“How’d you guys get out of there?” Jax asked as he held out a beer to him while he and Opie both pulled chairs away from the table to offer Tara more room to work.
“Flashbangs and grenades.” It was a lot easier to get out of there then one would expect. “Stiles had the jeep stashed in the woods. We picked that up and headed here. Had to go a couple hours out of our way to make sure we weren’t followed.”

“Did they bring Stiles in after you-“

“Before.” He had woken up with Stiles in his face. “They had him a day longer or maybe a couple hours.”

“Do you know where he was before that?” Opie questioned, eyes finding Stiles prone form on the table.

“Wandering.” That is what he gathered from what Stiles had told him.

“Did he tell you where his dad was?” Piney asked as if he already knew the answer. There was only one real reason Stiles would be separated from his father.

“They were with his friends up in Washington. Scavengers attacked their camp. His dad was killed.” He wouldn’t reveal more than that. It was Stiles story to tell. “It happened over a year ago, but I don’t think he’s really had much time to deal with it. He talked a little about it in the car, he was sort of drifting, and he said some things. Maybe you should talk to him about it.”

“We will.” Jax assured him. “Thanks for bringing him home.”

“Is he going to be okay?” He looked to Tara for an answer, hoping he did not bring Stiles all the way here to watch him die.

“The lacerations on his chest are deep, some of them are infected. Antibiotic should clear it up.” Should, as in there was a chance it would not. “I’m more worried about the head wound. You said it was a two-by-four?”

“He thinks it was. He was hit from behind. Then he hit his head again at the warehouse.” When they were caught in the blowback from the explosion. “He was dizzy and nauseous. It was kinda hard for him to breathe. The confusion and vision problems didn’t start until we had been on the road a while.”

“It can take time for symptoms of a concussion to present. In situations like this, I would normally do an x-ray, or an MRI, maybe a CT-scan, to rule out bleeding or swelling of his brain.” She didn’t have access to that kind of equipment anymore. “We need to keep a close eye on him. Wake him up every few hours to check his blood pressure, to determine if he’s aware of his surroundings and things like that.”

“What about these burns here?” Piney pointed to the silver band spanning across the top half of Stiles chest and arms. “What do you do about those?”

“Those are healed.” She reached a hand out, as if she would run her fingers over them but stopped herself.

“Kid’s been through hell.” Piney combed his fingers through Stiles hair in a paternal gesture. “He fought to get here. He shouldn’t have had to fight to get passed the damn gate. What the hell happened out there?”

“Miles thought I came back looking for retaliation. He wasn’t going to let us through the gate.” He could bet that Miles reacted more out of fear and paranoia than he did ill intent. “Stiles rammed it, knocked Miles down. He shot him because was reaching for his rifle and he put a hole in the jeep.”
“Of course he did.”

“That’s enough for tonight.” Chibs declared suddenly. “You should shower and get to bed, Juicy. You’ve had a long couple of days.”

“Yeah, okay.” He was a little suspicious about why Chibs wanted him out of the room, but he figured it had to with Miles and he was better off not knowing. “For the record, if I wanted payback for being ditched, I’d take it up with Miles and V in the ring, not with Mayhem.”

“We’ll keep that in mind.”

“Wake me if anything changes with Stiles.” If something happened while he was sleeping, he wanted to know.

“Aww. You sweet on him, Juicy?” The Scot flashed him a playful grin.

“Shut up.” That was pretty much an admission and he wanted to smack himself for it.

“Something Ope and I should know?” He figured that was Jax’s polite way of asking if they needed to give him the protective big brother speech.

“I just want to know if he’ll be okay.” What could have possibly happened between them in only two days? Aside from some harmless flirting.

“He’s going to be fine.” If the antibiotic worked and his head trauma wasn’t worse than Tara thought it was, then he would fine, sure. “Shower and sleep, brother. We’ll come get you if anything changes with the boy.”

“Where am I sleeping?” When they came in, he had noticed the cot he normally slept on was taken by someone else.

“The couch in the apartment. We’re moving Stiles to the bed in there after he wakes up.” They had managed to shove a few beds and couches into the clubhouse and garage, after they moved out a bunch of other crap. Juice had never been offered the comfort of one before, usually ending up on the floor or pool table. “Rough few days, you could use the cushioning.”

“Thanks.”

They took cover in an abandon motel, some shoddy thing that probably wasn’t in the best shape before the dead rose. They piled into adjoining rooms, having learned the hard way that being separated was not the best idea.

“Anything?” Melissa asked as she handed out the last of their food rations.

“Three walkers in the room two doors down.” Derek handed off his portion to one of the humans who needed it more. “Eight in the level above us.”

“The doors are blocked and this is a second story room, so the window won’t be a problem. We’ll be safe here for the night.” Scott insisted, though they all knew safe was relative term these days. “Start fresh in the morning.”

“We’re going to need fuel, water, and food.” Chris listed off the main items they were always in need of. “Or we’re not going anywhere.”
“Where are we going?” Lydia grimaced as she took in the state of the room. “This isn’t the nicest place, but it wouldn’t be hard to secure. We can make a camp here for a while, not just the night.”

“No.” The true alpha shot her down. “You know we can’t. Staying in one place is too dangerous.”

“Yes, because being continuously on the move isn’t dangerous at all. With the scavengers and other packs, never mind the walking dead.” Peter drawled. “Gas isn’t easy to come by, yet we keep wasting what we have going from place to place with no end in sight. We can’t go on like this forever you know.”

“You can leave if you don’t like the way we do things, Peter.” Allison hinted not so subtly about wanting him gone.

“That is a fabulous idea.” It was an old argument and Peter never made it to the door without someone stopping him before, he doubted it would be any different this time.

“No one is going anywhere.” Scott spoke up a again, with a little less patience. “We stick together, just like we always have.”

“Then you need to start being realistic about what we are doing.” Cora rarely put in her two cents, tended to go along with whatever Derek chose to do, but sometimes the stupidity of the group just drove her mad. “We can’t keep driving. We need a permanent place to go. If you don’t want to do that, you don’t have to. The rest of us aren’t going to get ourselves killed because you’re running away from something you can’t actually run from.”

She hit the nail on the head and they all knew it. They had been on the run since Port Angeles, never stopping in one place for more than a few nights. They tried to put as much distance between them and that town as they possibly could, trying to get away from what happened there.

“Maybe we should go home.” Lydia proposed hesitantly. “Not to Beacon Hills, but to California. It’s familiar territory.”

“Most of Northern California was evacuated to coastal towns.” Deaton explained casting a cautious glance toward the alpha. “We can scour the refugee centers for supplies, or maybe a few of them are still standing.”

“We can find people we know. Other’s from Beacon Hills that survived, that stuck around.”

“I don’t know.” Scott ran a hand through his hair. “What do we do when we get there?”

“If we’re going to the coast we can always find a boat, anchor off shore, only come to port if we need supplies.” He was pretty sure that was the end game for most zombie flicks and it never turned out well.

“Okay. Let’s go home.”

Stiles spent his first few days in Charming asleep more often than not. It wasn’t the restful kind of sleep though. When he wasn’t being woken up every few hours to answer questions, he was waking himself up, either from a nightmare or from the pain.

He was never really alone, he noticed that much once his fever broke and he was able to stay awake for more than five minutes at a time. Juice spent his nights on the couch on the opposite
side of the room. Bobby or Pinney would spend an hour or so reading a book at the desk. Gemma would come in to shove food down his throat. Jax and Opie cuddled with him in bed. Tara and Chibs would check over his injuries every so often. The company was nice, but made him feel a little claustrophobic, which was probably the point.

They let him hide away in the apartment for a whole week after Tara had given him the OK to get up and around again. He knew he should listen to them. He needed to move around again, get his muscles working. He was no use to anybody lying around in his own filth for days on end. He knew that but he didn’t care. A part of him just wanted to stay locked away and never get out of bed again.

His brothers must have sensed his plan to linger indefinitely, because they sent in the big guns. The big guns being Tig’s daughter Dawn swinging the door open, a wet sponge in her hands, and announcing that she was there to give him his afternoon bath. He scrambled out of bed so fast you wouldn’t think he had been hurt at all.

“That was a dirty play!” He yelled down the hallway, earning a round of chuckles from those who were gathered in the clubhouse.

He was out of bed, but he wasn’t up for seeing everyone. Instead, he steeled himself before climbing up the ladder that lead to the rooftop. His body twinged and ached with every move but he made it, it only took him three minutes longer than it normally would have.

He made his way to the edge, looking out at what was left of Charming. The town was surprisingly well preserved, even with the dead walking about. The hospital seemed to have taken the brunt of the destruction, the tops levels were gone, blasted by something. The rest of the town was still standing, more or less.

“Coming up here probably wasn’t the best idea.” Jax noted as he and Opie joined him. “It’s going to be a bitch for you to get back down.”

“I needed the fresh air.” He doubted they would have let him walk out the front door.

“Feeling better?”

“Mentally or physically?” They were two entirely different kinds of trauma. “Both are kind of shaky right now.”

“You’re out of bed, that’s progress.” There was no lack of sarcasm in Opie’s voice.

“Only to avoid an unwanted scrub down.” He shivered at the thought of it. “I can bathe myself, thanks.”

“You should, too. You stink.” Jax made a show of waving a hand under his nose. “We’ve got hot water and soap, when you’re ready.”

“And electricity.” Things that were very hard to come by these days. “Running a generator?”

“Yep.”

“You ever think putting some solar panels up?” The roofs on the surrounding buildings were perfect placement for optimal sunlight. “It’s more efficient in the long run. It’ll let you save the generator for emergencies.”

“Solar panels…” The blond mulled it over. “Hadn’t really thought about it.”
“What’s the long term strategy for maintaining this place?” They both looked a little puzzled by the question, which was answer enough. “There’s more to living than just surviving, you know.”

“The world ended, Stiles. There’s nothing left but survival.”

“You’re wrong. The world didn’t end.” It was a zombie-filled dystopian nightmare, sure, but it wasn’t over. “It may have gotten knocked down a few pegs, but we haven’t gone back to being cavemen. We still have knowledge and technology that the generations before us never had.”

“What’s your point?”

“If it really ended none of us would be alive. The world only ends when we stop fighting to right it.” If it had been the end there would be no living soul left among them. “You’ve gotten a great start here.”

“A great start.” He wasn’t surprised that Jax was offended by his words. “And what else do you think we should do?”

“Cordon off sections of the town at a time, clear them until they’re walker free. Build a wall around the town to ensure it stays that way. Maybe put two other walls up outside that one, in case someone attacks or a hoard finds it way here.” The secondary walls would go down first, giving them time to eliminate the threat before it came near the town. “Get some solar panels up. Start a farm and a vegetable garden. We can get the radio tower running for communications. Open one of the med clinics, since the hospital is a no-go.”

“I can see us clearing out a section, if only so we’re not all packed into the clubhouse and garage.” He could imagine how quickly that would get old. “Why the hell do we need to clear the entire town? That’s overkill.”

“When Juice and I found our stuff in that warehouse, there were things left behind by the scavengers previous victims. There were teddy bears, action figures, and dolls. Things that belonged to kids.” He remembered wondering if the scavengers snatched the children from their families, if they were killed with their families, or if they were found traveling on the roads by themselves. “I forgot when I was on my own. I forgot that there are other people out there, good people. Those people need a place to go, somewhere safe.”

“You want us to clear the town and let strangers come in?” Jax asked incredulously. “You? The guy who nearly had a panic attack two weeks ago when he was confronted by a clubhouse full of people.”

“Look, I get the Anarchy on your kutte means going against the government, not living by the rules the rest of us have to - or had to.” They were outlaws for fucksake. “In this world, anarchy is everywhere. We need some form of society or everything falls to chaos. If no one tries to rebuild, then it will only get worse until we die long before we’re old, either by walkers, scavengers, or disease.”

“He’s not wrong.” Opie took his side on the matter.

“You think we are the right people to establish society?” Yeah, it did kind of sound like a bad joke when you thought about.

“The club has been a society in itself since its inception. You’re capable of creating a new one for people to live in.” They wouldn’t be the only ones. There would be other groups trying to do the same thing, he was sure of it. Not everyone still out there could be bad. “I’m not saying we put up
signs and tell people we offer sanctuary. Let it work by word of mouth, travelers passing through. If they want to stay that’s fine, if they want a safe place to chill out before they’re on the road again, then that’s fine too.”

“And this is the right place for that?” It was as good a place as any.

“Charming’s a special town.”
He concentrated on his breathing and on the sounds of the forest. He blocked out the groaning that echoed in every direction, he couldn’t do anything with that. The rustle of leaves to his left, the snap of a tree branch behind him, those told him everything he needed to know.

Muscle memory was one of his greatest assets in this world. It allowed him to react before he realized he was doing so. The bowie knife that held a permanent place in the grip of his hand was lodged into the skull of the walker at his back without him looking over his shoulder or turning around. He was able to pull the blade free as the other one staggered over. He shoved his forearm against walker’s throat, then let the knife sink into its eye socket.

He glanced forward as the bodies dropped to the forest floor. He smirked and rolled the kinks out of his shoulders in preparation as he saw what was coming. He reached his free hand to pull a second blade from its sheath.

If he still had his rifle, he would retreat to a high tree and pick off the hoard of walkers one-by-one. He only had his knives since Washington. His time on the road had offered him the training he needed to be just as deadly with those as he was with a gun.

“All right,” He exhaled slowly as he readied himself. “Let’s do this.”

His eyes shot open as a shrilling noise blared in his ears. It was an annoying reminder that he was no longer in the woods surrounded by the dead. No, he was in a soft bed, in a house that was always too warm, and in a town that was relatively safe. In this world, he was living the life most people dreamed of. It was too bad he was not one of those people.

He sighed tiredly as he switched off the alarm clock and sat up, although part of him wanted to lie back down and sleep the day away. It was not a viable option, he learned that the first time Jax came in to forcibly drag him out by his ankles. He climbed out of bed simply to avoid a repeat performance.

He spied a note on the bedside table, leaning against the clock. It didn’t say much, ‘breakfast, diner, usual time.’ He smiled to himself and stashed it inside the drawer with the pile of others before heading to the bathroom.

He kept his shower quick, you had to in order to preserve water. He almost regretted growing out his hair from the buzzcut when he realized he was out of shampoo, again. Living without perpetually greasy hair was something he had become use to since he returned to Charming. He used what was left of the body wash to pull some of the gunk out of it before rinsing off.
He made a mental note to do laundry soon, while he dried himself off with a grungy towel, and began dressing. He put on his last pair of clean socks and three day old jeans, but stalled on the shirt. His gaze caught on the silver band of scars across his arms and chest. The marks from the knife wounds did not bother him, but the burns he hid behind long sleeves and plaid layers.

He pulled his shirt on swiftly, removing the scars from his sight, before grabbing his gloves off the side off the counter and sliding them on. The fingerless gloves had become a fixture, a second skin on his hands, since he had received them. Opie had brought them back from a run after an incident with the boys had made Stiles self conscious about his wounds.

The kids had been frightened by the extensive scarring on his fingers and palms when they had first seen them. Thomas had screamed, he had only been two at the time, so Stiles tried not to take it to heart, but it was hard not to. He had taken to keeping his hands in his pockets until Opie had brought him the pair of leather gloves that stretched up his wrist to conceal his old wounds.

The gloves had a second purpose as well. They were the key that unlocked the door to every place he needed to go in Charming. Every citizen in Charming wore a colored band that determined which areas in town they could access, his gloves acted as his band.

They set up the system to be safe. They could not implicitly trust those who made their way to Charming. There were always bad seeds in the mix. Some could try to take what they had, destroy them from the inside out. They could poison their food, steal their medicines, or bring down their communication system. To prevent any of that from happening, they had to limit the number of people who had access to those areas. Therein came the colored wristbands, each area had a different one.

Unrestricted was black, like Stiles gloves. Very few people were afforded that particular color. The difference between Stiles unrestricted access and the others who wore black bands, were the two strips of white that had been sown into the gloves.

They were there to ‘protect’ him, according to Jax. They were also the reason he dreamt of being on the road again, by himself. They confined him to this town, allowed him to pass through the first two gates that surrounded Charming, but not the third. It trapped him there without his consent.

“You’re late.” A voice cackled over the walkie-talkie in the other room. “Am I being stood up?”

He chuckled to himself as he made his way back into the bedroom. The radio was tossed haphazardly onto a pile of dirty laundry, right where he had left it the night before.

“I’m on my way.” He replied. “Just have to find my shoes.”

“They’re in the hallway by the front door.” Well, that made things easier. “Did you miss Chibs cursing up a storm when he tripped over them coming in last night?”

“Chibs should learn to come home at a decent hour then.”

When they first began clearing out different areas of Charming, they also started moving out of the clubhouse. They did not have a lot of homes prepared at the time, so they had doubled up. Juice and Chibs took a three bedroom just off Main Street. Stiles had been shuffled around a bit.

He lived with Jax, Tara, and the boys for a while, but that was still too many people packed into a small space, and the couch was hell on his back. He stayed with Piney until the old man and Mary had rekindled their romance, and Stiles did not want to be an awkward third wheel to that. In a
moment of insanity, he let himself be talked into cohabitating with Gemma and Grandpa Nate, before he remembered he and Gem didn’t like each other. Eventually, he took up residence in Juice and Chibs extra room.

It worked out better than his previous homes. The three of them gravitated around each other perfectly, never got on each other’s nerves. And, well, if Stiles stopped sleeping in his own room at some point and started sleeping in Juice’s, then it was no one’s business but their own. Chibs didn’t really seem to mind, in fact he had a score board on the fridge where he rated their performance if they happened to be a little louder than necessary some nights. He was kind enough to take that board down when they had company.

“What does Chibs’ late nights have to do with your inability to put your shoes away?”

“I didn’t get home from the office until after three this morning.” Yeah, he had an office now. “He wouldn’t have tripped over my shoes if he came in at a decent hour, which would have been long before I got home.”

“Sure.” Juice drawled sarcastically. “Since I’m waiting on you, do you want me to order?”

“That’d be great.” That way he could just sit and eat. “Grab one of the deck tables, okay?”

“That kind of morning, huh?” The older man mused and Stiles was not taking the bait on that one. “Outside table, got it. I have to be at clubhouse soon, so…”

“I’m coming.”

Fort Bragg was the longest they had stayed anywhere since Port Angeles. It was their last stop in a long line of coastal towns. They started in Crescent City, after an ill-advised detour back to Beacon Hills, and continued South, making their way through Klamath, Patrick’s Point, Trinidad, and so on. They tried to stay parallel with highway 101, without actually being on it.

The evacuation centers had all been deserted, some even burned to the ground. There were still supplies to be found in the areas around them, though not many. The first aid stocks were raided right before or directly after the centers went down. It made them increasingly hard to come by.

First aid also happened to be what his pack was running low on. They had used the majority of their supply after an incident passing through Eureka, when a herd of walkers had stumbled across their camp. Since they had settled in Fort Bragg, they had made every effort to find more, and hadn’t acquired anything other than a few bandages so far. That is why they were trying to prepare a group to go out once again in search for something they could really use.

“No.” Scott told her, hoping they would at the very least reevaluate the plan. “I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“Whether it’s a good idea or not is irrelevant.” Allison argued, as he expected her to. “We need more first aid, Scott. Some of us are human. We don’t heal the way you do.”

“I get that. I do.” His mom was one of those humans. He could remember what it was like being human. “It’s not the plan I disagree with, so much as the execution of it.”

“You don’t think Kira and I can do it by ourselves.”
Kira was a kitsune and also one of the many survivors that had joined them since they returned to California. She was a good fighter, excellent with a sword. Her mom taught her well. She and Allison worked perfectly in sync with one another during battle. He knew that, but he still could not send them out there alone.

“That’s not what I’m saying.” He was well aware of how capable they were. “I want you to take one more person with you. Just to be safe.”

“The advantage Kira and I have is our ability to be fast and quiet.” They excelled at getting in and out as quickly and silently as possible. “Another person would slow us down and put us at risk.”

“Think of the third person as your getaway driver.” They could leave whomever they took in the car. “Take the walk-talkies. If something happens, you can radio them and they can come help you out. Not that you’ll need help.”

“We’ll take Malia.” Scott could not help but cringe, Malia was the world’s worst driver. “Her full shift can come in handy if there’s an emergency.”

“Fine.” Malia’s ability to shift completely into a coyote had come in handy more than once when they found themselves in a sticky situation. “It’s straight to Mendocino and back. No extra stops if you can’t find what you’re looking for. We can’t…”

“I know.” They could not afford to lose any more people, Allison understood that. “We will get the car loaded up, so we can be out of here by noon.”

They re-opened the diner around the same time Charming became a somewhat functional town again. It had been a family owned restaurant before the apocalypse. Now, Gemma, Mary, and a handful of others took shifts there. They didn’t charge money or offer a wide variety of meals, but it was a little taste of normalcy that people needed.

Jax usually stopped by the diner every morning for a cup of coffee, something he did not get a chance to do with Tara before she went to the clinic. Most mornings, like this one, Opie tagged along, so they could discuss recent events or shoot the shit. It helped them both relax before the stress of the day wore them down.

When he walked through the doors, he was not surprised to see Juice at the counter waiting for his meal. Juice and his little brother had a standing breakfast date before the crew left on a run. Stiles was generally too busy with his own duties to see the guys off, and goodbyes weren’t exactly their style anyway.

“Hey,” He clapped the other man on the back as he and Ope came to stand beside him. “Meeting Stiles?”

“He’s running a little behind today, but he’s on his way.” The younger man tilted his head to the side in a ‘what can you do’ gesture. “Don’t worry, I won’t be late for the run.”

“Actually, there’s been a change in the roster.” Juice furrowed his brows in confusion. “Gonna need you to stay behind this time.”

“Having some issues with the electrical grid.” Opie explained. “Need you to go take a look. You’re the most familiar with it.”
“All of my experience with the grid has been guess work and hunches. I was a hacker, not an electrician or engineer.” Yeah, yeah. They heard it all before. “If it weren’t for the books I found in the library we wouldn’t have the solar panels and electrical grid up and running.”

“Well, it’s been pretty good guess work and hunches so far.” Jax praised. “I’m sure you can figure out what’s going on and fix it.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere.” That was a boldfaced lie if he had ever heard one. Giving Juice a compliment on his work was the easiest way to get him to do something. “Can I make a suggestion for the run? My replacement?”

“Sure.” Juice had been on almost every run they had gone out on since the beginning. If anyone knew who would be the best fit, it would be him.

“Stiles.”

“No.” Absolutely fucking not.

“Jax.”

“I said no.” Everyone knew Stiles was not allowed on runs. Juice was an idiot to mention it at all. “He’s not going.”

“He needs to get out of this place for a while.” Juice claimed, and that was a crock of shit. “He’s climbing the walls.”

“That kid does not leave the compound.” It was one of the main rules he set in place. “Do not bring this up again.”

“Whatever.” Juice muttered as he picked up two plates of food just as they were set on the counter. “Thanks, Gem.”

“Everything okay?” The matriarch’s gaze flickered between them.

“Fine.” Juice jerked his head toward the deck. “We’ll be out there. I’ll bring the plates in when we’re done.”

“All right, darlin.” She watched him walk out with hunched shoulders before her eyes found Jax and Opie. “Go sit down. I’ll bring your food when it’s done.”

They took their usual table by the window. It offered a nice view of town square and of the deck where Stiles and Juice would be sitting.

“He’s not wrong.” Opie drummed his fingers against the surface of the table. “About Stiles. Juice isn’t wrong about him.”

“Don’t.” He held up a hand to stop whatever Opie thought he had to say. “You of all people should be on my side. That is our little brother.”

“I understand your side of it, but I don’t agree with it.” That was not what Jax wanted to hear. “You can’t treat him like a prisoner.”

“I’m trying to keep him safe.” That was the only thing he could do for their brother. He was not sure why Opie had a problem with it. “It’s too dangerous outside those walls.”

“He spent a year out there on his own, Jax. He survived that—”
“He was half-dead when he showed up.” The kid had been more or less comatose for a week, then stuck in a rut of depression and anxiety for months. “I am not going to send him out there to end up that way again.”

“He survived a year on his own.” Opie repeated, more firmly this time. “If he goes on a run, he’ll be with a group.”

“‘Cause that worked out so well for him last time.” The first group Stiles had been with was responsible for the scars that now lined his body.

“This time it will be our people, ones we know will have his back.” That was true, but it did not change Jax’s mind. “He will be fine.”

“He’ll be fantastic.” Nothing was ever going to harm that kid again. He would make damn sure of it. “Because he is not going anywhere.”

“If you keep trying to control him, by keeping him locked in here,” Locked was a strong word, though he was man enough to admit that was exactly what he was doing. “Then he’s going to run. He will scale the walls, find a weakness in them, or stow away in the truck before a run leaves. Either way, he’s gone.”

“I won’t let that happen.”

“Keep putting him in a cage and you won’t have any say in the matter.” A cage. Jesus. People came through the walls and into Charming and never wanted to go back out, because it was safe. It wasn’t some prison, it was salvation. “Juice is right, Stiles is climbing the goddamn walls. It’s not because he wants to be out in the danger. It’s that he knows you will never let him out. We always want what we cannot have. Right now, he can’t leave, which only makes him want it more.”

“For two years we looked for him and found nothing, Ope. Two years of hoping he wasn’t dead, or turned, or taken by some psychopath. And when he finally showed up, he was…” Broken was not the right word. That implied there was something wrong with him, and there wasn’t. He was different, sad, rougher around the edges, and hardened in a way that every Son came to be after doing time. That was not the life he wanted for Stiles. “I can’t send him out there to get hurt. I am responsible for him, the same way I am my sons.”

“He’s not a little kid anymore, Jackson. He’s a grown man.” He was barely twenty, nowhere near grown. “He doesn’t need us to protect him anymore, and that is what scares you. It scares me too.”

It fucking terrified him. One of his responsibilities as an older brother was to protect his younger sibling at all costs, almost like a father. Stiles had never pushed against that, had allowed Jax to care for him without complaint. Now, he was not fighting Jax, so much as letting him have his way to give him peace of mind. Stiles gave in to Jax’s rules, even if he didn’t want to, because he thought it was what Jax needed.

“You don’t believe he is capable of taking care of himself, fine. Look at it this way instead, the volunteer sheet for the runs is public record.” It was tacked to a pin board in community center. “His name is on that sheet every time. The people of this town know you make the final decision on who goes. You don’t think they’ve caught on to the fact that your little brother is the one who never makes the cut? To them, it’s you showing blatant favoritism.”

“I don’t give a shit what these people think.” If they did not like the way things were done then they were more than welcome to hit the road. “Stiles has enough to do for his town without risking his life for it too. He’s busy doing other shit. He doesn’t have time to go.”
“That other shit being the desk job you assigned him, even though he wanted to work on the wall.” The desk job was more important, and a better use of Stiles talents. “He’s playing by your rules now, allowing you to dictate what he does and how far he can go, but that won’t last forever. He is going to unravel. He’s already started.”

“He is fine.” He spared a glance out the window, seeing his brother’s relaxed posture as he greeted Juice with a warm smile. “He’s good.”

“Have you noticed that when he walks into a room, he opens every window and door available?” What the hell did that have to do with anything? “He’s feeling boxed in. He has been snapping at everyone. He gets more like a caged animal every day.”

“I understand that.” He had been to prison, he knew what it was like to be stuck somewhere with no way out. “I get that he needs…. I just can’t let him.”

“Give him a chance, Jax.” There was a hint of pleading in Opie’s voice that he was not use to hearing. Opie was worried about Stiles, more so than he let on. “Forget today’s run. That shit is already set. I will go on the next one, with Stiles, and see how he does. That way you know he will be safe.”

“I don’t…” Truth be told, he did not like any of his brothers going out on runs, but he knew if they went, they would be safer together. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Don’t tell him just yet.” He didn’t want Stiles to get his hopes up in case things fell through. “It’ll only distract him.”

“Distract him from his Deputy Mayor duties.” Sarcasm was heavy in Opie’s tone, and, yeah, that title was given to Stiles as a joke one night and then it seemed to stick. Stiles hated it. The rest of them thought it was hilarious.

As Sons of Anarchy President, Jax had somehow landed himself as the leader of the town, the acting Mayor, so to speak. The shitpile that job came with only continued to grow with the more people that came in. Not many people had made their way to the gates yet, but they had over sixty people filling up their little town, which was a hell of a lot in this day and age. The society that they needed was forming and Jax was at the head of it. It was kind of a problem. He was an outlaw, not a politician.

Stiles, on the other hand, was the son of a sheriff. He also had the added benefit of growing up amongst the anarchists. He was taught how to play by the rules and work around them. He knew why having some sort of society was integral to their survival. It made Stiles the perfect person to connect their community. Plus, it was all his fucking idea, so Jax didn’t feel too bad about shirking some of the responsibility on to him.

Stiles had more duties than most in town. He headed the city council, dealt with whatever problems or complaints the citizens might have. He interviewed newcomers, decided which jobs they should have, and if they were the type to stir shit up. He scheduled the runs, figured out when and where they should go, and what they were going for. He did that and number of other things Jax did not want to do.

Stiles more or less ran the town, while Jax made the final decisions on things. Without him handling the paperwork bullshit, things would get very complicated. Or, you know, Jax might have to do it, and he really didn’t want to. That might be another reason he did not want Stiles to go on
runs, because he would actually have to do some of the shit he made his little brother do.

“Yeah, those duties.”

Malia wasn’t too pleased with being left in the car, but she was happy enough being away from camp for a few hours that she didn’t bitch about it. She agreed to be the lookout without much cajoling. It made it that much easier for Allison and Kira to get in and out fast, in theory anyway.

The refugee center in Mendocino was set up at the high school. The outside was crawling with walkers, a sign that no one had come through in a while. It was a little disconcerting, but nothing they hadn’t gone up against before.

The gym was their best bet in finding anything, they knew from past experience that it’s where the Red Cross usually set up. They fought their way across the football field, keeping close, back-to-back, so nothing could cut between them. They made it to a door with little issue, sighing in relief when it opened without a problem, leading them to a locker room.

“Did that seem too easy to you?” Kira asked as she shut the door behind them.

“Yes.” If it seemed too easy, it usually was.

Allison hated that they were proven right as they tiptoed around a row of lockers, only to find a crowd of walkers between them and the door that would lead to the gym. Kira steadied herself, raising her sword up, prepared to swing, while Allison leveled her crossbow at the herd.

It was all instinct, really. A hunters, a kitsunes, it was all the same now. Their base instinct was to survive. To do that, you had to fight, and that is what they did.

They took their back-to-back stance once more, and waited for the walkers to come to them. They did not go running to a group of them, that was how you got killed. No, you bided your time, let them come to you, and then picked them off one-by-one.

They did not get much of a chance to do anything before a hail of gunfire erupted in the small room. They took cover behind a block of lockers as the bullets took down walker after walker. The bodies fell to the linoleum floor with a sickening thud.

“What now?” The kitsune questioned in a hushed whisper.

“We can’t leave without those meds.” The humans in their group, including herself, would not survive long without them.

“So we fight.” Kira concluded, standing a little taller.

“If we have to.”

They stayed close to one another, with their weapons still drawn, as they moved from their hiding spot. There were three men standing on the other side of the room, with AK’s pointed in their direction. To their credit, they hid their shock well. They obviously were not expecting to find anyone else in the building.

“Uh, ladies,” One with a thick accent addressed them as his men lowered their weapons. “Didn’t mean to startle you.”
“Do we look startled?” She did not try to be friendly. She knew how to act around strangers. Any kindness would be seen as a weakness to exploit.

“No.” A heavier set man ceded. “We’re not looking to start anything. We’re just here looking for-“

“Those meds are ours.” She and Kira were here first, so they had prior claim.

“Aye.” The accented guy nodded. “We only need-“

“We don’t care what you need.” They were not going to let anyone take what they came for.

“The meds are yours.” The third man spoke up. “Any oxygen tanks are ours. That is non-negotiable.”

“Oxygen tanks?” Kira gave them a considering look.

“We’ve got an old man in our town, he’s running low.” Worry flittered over the features of the men. “We are taking those tanks back to him. We know refugee centers had ‘em for the elderly folks.”

“It looks like you’ve been on the road a while,” The accented man stepped into a stream of light, allowing Allison and Kira to see the scars on his cheeks. “We don’t want to cause you any more trouble than you’ve already found. We just want the tanks.”

“Fine.” They didn’t need them. “But that is all you are getting.”

“Yeah, darlin, we already said that.” The man shook his head. “No need to get all territorial.”

“Hey,” The heavier set guy waved a hand in their direction while speaking to his friends. “Should we-“

“You are not going to touch us.” There was no way Allison or Kira would let that happen.

“We don’t have any plans to. You’re a little too tween for our tastes, and we like our girls consenting.” It was clear from the man’s tone of voice that his patience was wearing thin. “He was wondering if we should tell you we got a town. We have walls, and started taking in survivors a few months back.”

“You think we would trust you enough to let you lead us to some town?” These guys were out of their minds.

“We aren’t going to lead you anywhere.” He scoffed at her underlying accusations. “We are just telling you that it is an option if you gals or your group find yourselves backed into a corner. You need someplace to go, then you are welcome to travel to our town. I’m sure you can read a map. It’s called Charming.”

“We’re going to pass.”

“But thank you for the offer.” Kira tacked on quickly. “It’s very nice of you.”

“Aye.”

When Stiles suggested they clear the town and take in strangers seeking a safe haven, he never thought he would have such a shitty prominent job in it. He assumed he would be a guard at the gate, or be on the run team. He did not expect, nor want, all the tasks Jax felt were beneath him.
Really, he should have appreciated rebuilding the town more, because at least then he felt like he was doing something useful.

Clearing out all the walkers within the city limits was the simplest thing they had done. The group as a whole was quick and efficient at taking them out. The walls took the longest to build. It had been a little over a year since they began putting them up, and really, only one of them was done, that had more to do with a lack of supplies than anything. The two inner most were made of thick steel plates, which were hard to come by. The third wall was a run of the mill chainlink that allowed them to take out walkers that lined up there.

They started taking in survivors a few months after the first wall was put up. There were not many, most were former Charming residence who decided to come home and see how things were, then decided to stay. The few other newcomers were from Northern California originally. There were even four from Beacon Hills.

Harley was first to show up. Stiles had known her before, they were friends in middle school but drifted apart during freshman year at BHHS. Caitlin and Emily came in together, they were evacuated to Nevada in the beginning, and had been trying to make it back to Beacon Hills for some time, before giving up and heading further south, finding a place in Charming. The last to arrive was Mason. He was a kid a few years behind him in school, who now worked with him at the community center.

Stiles got along pretty well with the Beacon Hills and Charming natives. It was some of the others he struggled with. He did not trust the outsiders on the principal of it. He didn’t outright hate any of them, but he did have an active disdain for a few.

“Stilinski, are you even listening to me?” One of those people he disliked, she was sitting in front of him right now.

“Yes, Althea.” He used her first name only because it caused her face to pinch in irritation.

Althea Jarry had shown up four months ago and declared herself the new sheriff. He’s not really sure how she strong armed the two deputies that were already there, but neither spoke a word against her. Jarry was under the false assumption that her word was law. No one in charge had actually put her in a position of power, and the townspeople knew that and often ignored her. Nevertheless, her lack of control never stopped her from being a royal pain in the ass.

“You want gas for a patrol car, correct?” It was the same thing every goddamn week.

“Yes.”

“No.” His answer was the same each time she brought it up. “The gas reserve is for supply runs and the back-up generators. The single ambulance and firetruck also receive a small amount in case of emergencies.”

“I am the sheriff. I get called out for emergencies.” No, she really did not. The Sons were called first, not the makeshift police department.

“You and your deputies have horses.” He knew how much she despised them. “You ride a horse, or a bicycle, or you walk. Those are your choices.”

“That is not your decision, it’s the councils.”

Ah, yes, the council. That dumbass idea belonged to Tara and he was never going to forgive her for it. Though, as head of the clinic, she had to sit on the council to, so he figured that was punishment
enough. He was eternally grateful that Deputy Eglee was the police departments representative, so he didn’t have to put up with Jarry at those meetings as well.

“You have brought your need for access to the fuel reserve to the council’s attention multiple times.” Eight times. *Eight.* “The council’s answer has been the same every single time.”

“Stilinski-“

“This is not up for debate.” The council’s decision was final. “Now, if you don’t mind, I have other things to do today.”

“I do mind.” Of course she did. ”We have things to discuss.”

“Things beside gas?” The set in her jaw was answer enough. “Yeah, I didn’t think so. Leave, Althea, please.”

“Stilinski.” If she thought spitting out his surname as if it left a bitter taste in her mouth was going to change his mind, then she was dead wrong. It only made him want her out of his office more, and he knew exactly how to make her go.

“Althea.” He grinned sweetly. “I thought you would like to know that my boyfriend rode my dick in that chair last night, and I’m pretty sure there’s still some cum on the cushion.”

It wasn’t necessarily true. He and Juice had fucked in that chair, but they hadn’t done it last night. However, she didn’t know that, so her outraged reaction was normal, as was her slamming out the door like her hair was on fire.

“Oh, I am going to get so much shit for that when she bitches to Jax about it.” He mumbled to himself, not even a little bit sorry. “Maybe he’ll fire me. *Please* let him fire me.”

It was wishful thinking really. Jax would never fire him. In theory, he could get the council to impeach him, but that might take more work than it was worth. Even if he managed to pull it off, he was sure Jax had some kind of veto power that would keep him in his position as Deputy Mayor of *Hell* Charming.

“Hey, Mason!” He called out to the kid who acted as his assistant.

“Yeah?” The teenager poked his head through the door.

“Is there anything else on the schedule for the day?” He loathed that schedule. He was probably the only person besides Tara that worked on a stupid schedule during the apocalypse.

“Only paperwork.” The paperwork was endless. “You gonna take off?”

“Yeah. I can do the paperwork at home. You’re good for the day. Go have lunch or fun. Whatever.” Someone should be out having fun, since Stiles definitely would not be.

“Cool. Thanks. See you tomorrow.”

“Yep.” And the day after that, and the day after that, so on and so forth until Mason moved on to a different job if he chose to. Hell, he could do Stiles job, and he might even enjoy it. If that happened, Stiles could move on to something more exciting. Again, more wishful thinking.

He resigned himself to a future of dealing with irritating people as he shoved file folders of paperwork into his backpack. He hefted it over his shoulder before switching off the light and
leaving the room. Mason had fled as soon as he gave the go ahead, turning off whatever needed to be off before he had left. All Stiles had to do was lock up as he took his leave.

The walk he had to take was a relatively long one, but he had gotten use to it. He and just about everyone else walked or rode a bicycle. There was no practical use for personal cars anymore, especially since gas was an increasingly scarce commodity. There were not many places to go in Charming anyhow. Most of what they had opened to the public was in the center of town, so once you got there you were good to go.

On a normal day, Stiles would go straight home after a day at the office. On the off chance he worked a half day, like today, he would head to the schoolhouse to check in on Abel and Thomas. There were some days, however, when he woke up feeling the weight of a phantom knife in his hands, and it would put him on the path to the gates.

“Hey,” He knocked his fist against the wall. “It’s Stilinski. Open up.”

The gates at the entrance of town could be opened one way. There was a combination lock that only the guards and a few other people knew the code to. Stiles was not one of the people who was privy to that particular information. It was another item on a long list of things that pissed him off on a daily basis.

“What?” The Son on duty, Kozik, glanced down at him from his perch at the top of the wall. “What’s up, Stiles?”

“Unlock the gate.” Why the hell else would he have walked all the way out there?

“Sure.”

Stiles waited patiently as the older man climbed down the ladder and slid open the first steel door. He shut it the moment Stiles crossed the threshold. He knew the drill by now and obediently opened the second before Stiles said a word.

“Don’t suppose I could sweet talk you into opening the third one, huh?” He offered the Son a hopeful grin, knowing he was going to be shot down.

“Sorry, bro.” He actually sounded sympathetic to Stiles plight, so Stiles wouldn’t blame him for refusing to disobey orders. “It’s a bit crowded. The C.C. team hasn’t been out yet.”

C.C. stood for Clear and Clean. They were the group that took out the walkers built up against the outer wall. They stabbed them with sharp objects through the chainlink, and then burned their bodies when they were through.

“Any reason why?” The C.C. team’s representative had not mentioned anything at the last council meeting. “They are supposed to be out here at 8:00am every morning. No exceptions.”

“All I know is that they haven’t shown up today. They didn’t sign in at the log,” Anyone going through the gate had to sign in and out. “And the guard on duty before me never saw them.”

“We won’t be able to burn the bodies tonight.” They could only light a fire while the sun was still up. It was too risky to start one at night. The brightness of it would attract all sorts of things. “If they happen to show up sometime tonight, you tell them I will be here tomorrow to reiterate the stipulations of their employment here.”

“Yeah. Okay.” Kozik nodded along, but took a few cautious steps away from him, almost as if he were scared. “You’re kinda…pent up. You want to do what the C.C. team didn’t?”
“Yes.” In fact, there was nothing he would like more.

He took in the line of walkers pushing against the chainlink. He went for the sheath connected to his belt, only to find himself grasping at nothing but thin air. The sheath wasn’t there, it was at home, tucked away in a drawer alongside his knives.

“I’ll get you one of the pointy sticks.”

“Is that a technical term?”

“It’s a broom with an end shaved into a point.” A pointy stick, sure.

“Should have the run team raid a museum and get us some swords.” They would be more effective than what they were using now, cooler too.

“Bring it up the next time you talk to them.” Kozik suggested. “They raided that sex shop off the highway when you told them to. We all benefited from that, bro. You’ve become a God to the women of this town.”

“The God of Sex Toys.” Still a better title than Deputy Mayor. “I told them to do it for the batteries, not the goodies. Adult stores always have them, but people wouldn’t think to check there in a crisis. Plus, we needed the condoms to prevent STDs and overpopulation. And lube. We definitely needed lube. The toys were just a bonus.”

“Whatever the reason, we are all very appreciative of your out of the box thinking that led to that decision.” Yeah, he became very much aware of that after the round of drunken kisses he had received after the team had come back from that trip. “Keep it up, man.”

“That thinking could be more useful on the road with the team.” Seriously, his best ideas came to him in chaotic situations.

“Not my area, bro.” He knew that too, but it did not hurt to mention it. “Don’t worry, I’m not one of those idiots who will tell you to be understanding because Jax is only trying to protect you.”

“I appreciate that.” Even though, he just kind of just became one of those idiots. “Can I get that pointy stick now?”

“Yeah.”

The team had returned from Mendocino sooner than Jax expected, but everyone was accounted for, so he had nothing to complain about. They were all sitting around the chapel table, waiting for the rest of the Sons to filter in from their jobs in town. Since most were present already, Jax decided to go ahead and start the meeting.

“How’d it go, guys?” He turned to Chibs, who had led the mission. “Did you find any tanks?”

“Aye.” The Scot slid the inventory list over. “No miniature ones, but four big ones. Those should last a while.”

“Thank you.” Piney offered his gratitude to the team.

“That’s all you got?” Jax was not ungrateful, what they brought back was great, but they had never come back from a run without a few extra items as well.
“There were two girls at the school, they needed the rest.” Bobby explained. It was not uncommon to find other groups on a run. They assisted them if need be, whether it was helping them out of a tight spot, or offering them supplies. “Tough chicks. Didn’t trust us one bit.”

“Smart.” The ones who did not trust at first glance were the ones you wanted on your side. “You tell them about this place?”

“We did, but they didn’t seem inclined to join us.” No one ever did at first.

“Sorry I’m late.” Kozik apologized as he came through the door and took his seat. “Had to warn the C.C. team that they are in for a nasty surprise come morning.”

“What happened?” The prospects were on the C.C. team, and while they had problems with them before, nothing had come up in recent months.

“They didn’t show up for work today.” That was just perfect. The last thing they needed was for that chainlink to go down because walkers were piled against it. “Walkers have been cleared. We’ll burn ‘em in the morning.”

“What’s the surprise the C.C. team has waiting then?”

“Stiles is going to remind them what happens when people do not do their jobs.” That made sense, in the sense that it didn’t.

“I’m guessing that means Stiles was at the gate sometime today.” It was the only way he could have known the C.C. team had not shown up. “Why was he there?”

“Do really not know the answer to that?” Juice questioned incredulously.

“Juicy, this is not the time to get snippy.” Chibs chided.

“Claustrophobia, Sheriff Jarry,” Opie ticked off the list on his fingers while looking Jax dead in the eye. “You. He takes out his frustration with all that on the walkers.”

“Whatever.” He had been bitched out enough about his brother today. He did not need to listen to it again. “I’ll meet the C.C. team and Stiles at the gate in the morning to figure this shit out. For now, let’s get back to business. Juice, electrical grid? The power was flickering on and off all morning.”

“Is it flickering now?” The younger man gestured to the overhead light. “The grid is good until the next time something malfunctions. And, no, there is nothing I can do to prevent that.”

“Okay.” Snarky bastard. The kid seriously needed to rein in his attitude, Jax was about done with it. “Tig, did you go check in with Oswald at the farm?”

“He needs more people.” Wasn’t that always the case. “All the manpower we have working the farm is being split trying to get that second wall reinforced.”

“The wall can wait. The farm is top priority.” The second wall was not as sturdy as the innermost wall, but it was not a flimsy chainlink either. They could hold off on reinforcing it until the farm was up and running properly. “If something tried to come through the gates, we would know when the chainlink went down. We would neutralize the threat before it had a chance to bring down the second wall. That’s the whole reason we built three walls.”

“I’ll let Oswald and the build team know.”
“I went around and picked up the inventory lists from everyone, took ‘em to Mason, and he’ll give them to Stiles.” Piney handed over copies of said lists. “We’re pretty good on supplies from the looks of things, so he probably won’t have a run scheduled for the next few weeks.”

“Good.” They never waited until they were low on supplies to go. Once they used up a certain amount, they would send a team out for more. “Gives everyone a chance to rest.”

“Oh, Tara told me to remind you that Chibs is the only help she’s really got at the clinic.” The older man jerked a thumb toward the Scot, who was the only person, aside from Tara, that had any kind of medical training, thanks to his time in the army. “So, the less runs he goes on the better.”

“I can do first aid in the field, that’s why I go.” Chibs justified putting his name on the list. “I can teach someone else the basics, that way I can stay here to help Tara with more complicated procedures.”

“It would be good for at least one person per run team was trained in basic first aid.” They could bandage each other up and do CPR, but that was pretty much it. “Talk it out with Tara, pull a couple members that you both think can handle it.”

“Aye.”

“Anything else?” He opened the table for any other business only to receive a handful of bored stares. “Nothing? All right.”

Scott had learned a longtime ago never to doubt the girls when they were on a mission, but somehow he always ended up doing just that. He had no idea why, considering they continuously exceeded his expectations. This time was no different. They had come back from Mendocino with a load bigger than they had ever brought in before.

“What do you think, Mom?” He watched her sort through bag after bag, writing down every item she found.

“Bandages, gauze, surgical tape, antibiotics, aspirin.” She rattled off the list, looking a bit overwhelmed. “There’s even cough drops and allergy medicine. This is great, girls, really.”

“We could have gotten our hands on oxygen tanks, but there were a few guys there that claimed to need them.” Allison revealed as she helped unpack what was left from the run.

“We had no use for them anyway.” Kira added offhandedly.

“You saw other people?” He had been so caught up with what they had brought back that hadn’t even thought to ask. “Did they do anything? Try to hurt you?”

“No.” The fox shook her head. “They were kind of nice, actually.”

“They were a little creepy.” Allison scowled. “Invited us to some town they had. Who does that after just meeting someone?”

“Uh, you guys.” Malia interjected. “That’s sort of what you all did with us after we met, except with an RV and convoy of cars, not a town.”

“She’s right.” Kira agreed. “It was kind of weird, but it all worked out.”
“Did they tell you where this town was?” Scott inquired, wondering if they should at least look into it.

“Said we could find it on a map.” That would be helpful, if they had a name or coordinates. “It’s called Charming.”

Scott’s heart stuttered and stalled inside his chest at the name. He watched his mother freeze in place at the same moment. They both knew what it meant, knew that it could not be a coincidence.

Charming was Stiles, it was where he was born and spent every summer of their childhood. Scott used to hate it, because it was where Stiles would go during school vacations, when friends should have been spending time together. He had not thought about Charming in a long time, though he wished he could say the same about Stiles.

There was not a day that passed where Stiles didn’t cross his mind. He was sure it was no different for the others. Every night they would light a fire, to cook dinner or keep warm, and the camp would fall into a deathly kind of silence. The newer members of their group did not understand why, but the ones that did would tense and get that faraway look in their eyes.

He knew what they were thinking, what they were imagining. The house on the cliffs collapsing with Stiles beneath it. The smell of pain and burning flesh filling their noses. The heartbeat and screams lost beneath the sound of waves crashing, engines running, and a fire roaring. Stiles body burning down to ashes while they drove to safety.

“Y-you are sure they said Charming?” His mother asked, her voice wavering.

“That’s what they said.” Allison confirmed. “I checked the map, at this distance, it is maybe a four hour drive if the roads are clear.”

“You guys are acting weird.” Malia pointed out unhelpfully.

“I want everything we have loaded into the vehicles tonight.” He chose to ignore the coyotes comment in favor of formulating a plan. “We leave at first light.”

“What? Why?”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea, honey?” He felt his mom’s soft hand on his shoulder, anchoring him down. “We don’t know that it’s them. Sti- He went there after we evacuated Beacon Hills. He didn’t find them.”

Stiles and his dad had made the trip while they settled into the refugee center. When they returned, Stiles had retreated into himself, refused to speak to anyone until the center was attacked and overrun by walkers. It was only then that he came back to himself, and Scott was sure it was only because the pack needed him to.

The pack did not understand. They didn’t know about Jax or the Sons of Anarchy. They did not know why Stiles and John had disappeared for days only to come back carrying a new weight of grief. They still didn’t know now, but Scott would have to tell them if they were going to do this.

“We’ll scout it first, just to be safe.” He had to be sure the people in that town were the ones they were looking for. “If it’s them…we’ll tell them what happened. Even if we don’t stay, they deserve to know he’s gone.”

“Okay.” His mother rubbed comforting circles on his back as she addressed the girls once more. “You are absolutely sure they said Char-“
“Yes.” The huntress assured her. “Why does it matter? Does it mean something to you?”

“It means we’re going to Charming.”
They moved slowly, not allowing themselves to be rushed by their alpha. They took their time cleaning up the breakfast dishes, rolling up the sleeping bags, and loading up the last of their belongings in preparation to leave. No one was happy about it, they had grown use to their little bit of salvation in Fort Bragg, but they were doing as they were told.

“So, does anyone plan to ask why we are leaving?” Peter questioned the pack members at the washbin. “Or are we continuing the follow like dumb dogs?”

“We asked why last night, Scott wouldn’t say.” Kira shrugged her shoulders, the lack of reasoning not really bothering her.

“He hasn’t steered us in the wrong direction yet.” Parrish commented as he kicked dirt into the dying fire. “I’m inclined to follow him again.”

“Yes, well, you’re new. You were not following him in Port Angeles.” The older Hale remarked. “Something tells me your opinion would be a bit different if you were aware of exactly what happened there.”

“Peter.” He nephew warned. “Shut up and finish packing up the dishes.”

“Are you trying to tell me that you don’t find this the least bit odd?” They were usually given some sort of explanation for why they were leaving, this time they received nothing.

“It doesn’t matter. We all knew this wasn’t permanent.” No place you called home was permanent these days. “We will ask, but not right now. Scott has enough on his mind.”

Scott and Melissa had remained tightlipped since the decision to leave had been made. They talked amongst themselves, never directly to the pack. It put everyone no edge, made them nervous. Peter was the only one brave enough to bring it up, though no one cared what he had to say. He would forever be the untrustworthy resident psychopath, no matter what he did to prove otherwise.

“I wonder, nephew, how many more friends you are going to lose before you realize that Scott has no idea what he is doing.” Scott made decisions based on emotions and that got people killed. He was short on both instinct and basic logic, which were two things you needed to survive. “The Stilinski’s, Erica, and Boyd were not enough?”

“None of that was Scott’s fault.” Not directly, no, but his hands were still painted red from the blood of the fallen, whether he dealt the killing blow or not. “We all made mistakes.”

“What makes you so sure this isn’t another one?”

“Nothing.” Derek slammed the trunk of the car shut. “But we all promised to stick together. That is
“You both are here early.” Chibs acknowledged as Jax and Opie walked into his house without even a knock on the door.

“Picking up Stiles before we head to the gate to talk to the C.C. team.” Well, that team was in for a treat. Getting met by a Teller, Winston, and a Stilinski meant you were pretty much fucked. “He up yet?”

“I don’t know.” He had barely been up fifteen minutes himself. “If he was, he would be two cups of coffee in by now.”

“He in his room?” Jax moved toward the room that by all rights should contain Stiles.

“Uh…” There was zero chance of the kid being in there, but Jax was already turning the knob of the door so there was nothing Chibs could do to stop him.

“It’s empty.” The blond furrowed his brows in confusion. “Like it hasn’t been slept in at all.”

“He’s probably in with Juice.” Opie jerked a thumb to the room at the end of the hall.

“Why would he be in there?” Sometimes it was hard to tell if Jax really didn’t see it or if he was just willfully ignorant to his brother’s relationship status.

“Juicy’s room has the adjoining bathroom, and it has the best water pressure.” Chibs covered, not wanting to be the one to pull the pin on that particular grenade. “He’s more than likely in the shower. I’ll get him.”

He stood from the table and made his way to the master bedroom, rapping his knuckles against the doorframe before entering. The bed was blessedly empty, but the sound of water running was a telling sign of where the boys were. He didn’t give them another courtesy knock before walking into the bathroom, and neither of them noticed his presence until he pulled back the shower curtain.

“Break it up, kids.” He kindly ignored the fact that Juice had Stiles bent over and that they had frozen mid-thrust under the stream of water.

“What the hell, Chibs?” Juice squawked, removing a hand from Stiles hip to pull the curtain closed again. “We’re…busy.”

“Oh, I can see that.” Even with the curtain closed, he could see the outline of their bodies, and it was more than obvious what they were doing. “Finish it up. Stiles has company.”

“Who shows up this early?” The younger man groaned as he straightened up to full height.

“Your brothers.” Who the hell else would it be? “By the way, I’m not keeping your secret from Jax anymore.”

“What secret?”

“About you two being more than just fuck-buddies.” Jax did not seem to connect the dots far enough to see past the physical relationship. “That you’re in love and cohabitating and all that shit.”
“It’s not a secret.” Stiles argued, sticking his head around the curtain. “Everybody knows that!”

“Jackie boy is oblivious to it. One of these days you’ll just have to sit him down and give him the truth of it.” He would have to tread carefully when he did so.

“What truth of it?” The kid asked incredulously. “We are together. In love and all that shit. That is the truth.”

“You never told me you loved me.” Juice mumbled offhandedly.

“It was implied!” Stiles shoved the curtain back in place, to give he and Juice a semblance of privacy. “You never told me either.”

“It was implied.” Juice echoed weakly.

“For fucksake.” Chibs slapped a hand against his forehead. “We don’t have time for this. Juicy, get your dick out of the boy. He’s got shit to do.”

“We will talk about this later.” Stiles promised and Chibs rolled his eyes at the audible squelch the followed as they pulled apart. “Chibs, we need to get dressed, can you leave?”

“Not until I know you two aren’t going to start up again.” They were liable to if left alone too long. “Let’s go, kids.”

“Hand me a towel.”

If being interrupted in the middle of a having a really good morning did not put him in a foul mood, then being squished between his brothers in a pickup truck did the trick. They didn’t even bring him coffee or let him grab a cup from home, the bastards. It was not at all how he planned to start the day.

“I could have ridden in the back.” He would have been more comfortable in the bed of the truck than in the cab.

“You never minded sitting between us when you were little.” Opie draped his arm over the back of the seats.

“I used to fit.” He was not five years old anymore. Three grown adults did not fit well in a tiny pickup. “You know, I can handle the C.C. team by myself.”

“We should show a united front, so they know to get their act together.” He supposed united front was Jax’s polite way of saying show of force. “And knocking heads together is more our area than yours, little brother.”

“I had no plans to knock heads together.” That was not the way he worked. “There is a lesson they need to learn and I will be happy to teach them.”

“You’re a teacher now?”

“In this situation, yes.” The C.C. team did not need a physical altercation or a verbal berating. They needed a visual show of their uselessness. “Let me deal with them, all right? They are expecting me out there. They see you guys with me and they’ll think I’m some punk. The last thing I need is my authority being questioned.”
“No one is questioning your authority.” Jax claimed, as if he knew anything about it.

“I don’t wear a kutte and everyone knows I am your brother.” Two things that worked against him. “My authority is always in question. Why do you think Jarry always goes running to you when I piss her off?”

“We can change the kutte thing.”

“Even if I wanted to be SAMCRO,” He had never wanted to be a Son and the apocalypse had not changed that. “People would believe I only received top rockers because I’m your brother, not because I earned it. It is not a fix-all. If I want respect from these people, then I have to show them—”

“We get it.” Jax waved off his rant like it were nothing.

“You don’t respect me. Why the hell would they?” If he couldn’t get his own damn brothers to show him any kind of respect then he could not expect anyone else to.

“We respect you.” Bullshit. Major fucking bullshit.

“One of you does. The other has me on a leash.” He glanced pointedly at the white bands stitched to his gloves.

“Don’t open that door.” Opie advised. “I talked to him about this already. I’ve almost got you on supervised release.”

“You act like he’s in prison.”

“Who would be my supervisor?” He ignored Jax in favor of getting more intel from his other brother.

“Me.” Opie being his supervisor could be very good for him.

“Nice.” The younger Winston would let him off his leash, within reason at least. “When does that start?”

“I’m working on it.” Opie elbowed him in the side, a sign to shut up or risk losing that release. “Play nice with the warden until I can get a guarantee.”

“Fuck you both, okay? I’m not a goddamn warden.” Jax grunted, slamming the truck into park at the wall. “Do not start the teaming up thing about this. I have my reasons. Logical reasons.”

“I know, Jackson.” Stiles understood his brother’s reasoning, but he was still resentful of it. “I have let you do the overprotective thing since I got here. I’ve done that for you. Today, I need you to do something for me.”

“Which is what?”

“Let me take the lead on this shit with the C.C. team.” Getting this done right was important to him. “Don’t question my methods in front of these douchebags. Let me do what I do.”

“Fine.”

“Promise?” He needed to be sure his brother would not back out.

“I promise.” Jax vowed. “You and me? We’ve got to have a serious talk later, understand?”
“Yeah.” That sounded like crazy fun. “Later. Let’s do this now.”

They all seemed to be in agreement that Stiles would deal with it as they climbed out of the truck. The C.C. team was waiting for them just past the second gate. The guard on duty, a Beacon Hills native named Harley, let Stiles, Opie, and Jax through until they were standing directly in front of the other crew.

“So nice of you all to show up this morning.” Stiles shot a scowl to the members of the team, Miles, V-Lin, Filthy Phil, and Rat Boy. “Who wants to explain why you weren’t here yesterday?”

“Um...”

“Very articulate, Phil.” Stiles gave him a thumbs up. “Anyone else?”

“We don’t see the point in being out here every day.” Miles folded his arms over his chest defensively. “We can come out twice a week or something.”

“You could, yeah.” If they did things that way, they would end up spending all day out there, rather than an hour or so. The longer they held off, the more time it left for walkers to build up against the fence. “Or, you could do as you are told and go by the schedule.”

“It’s a waste of time to do this every single day.” Miles maintained.

“‘A waste of time.’” Stiles shook his head and looked to his brothers. “Open the last gate.”

Jax did not jump to comply, which wasn’t all that surprising. The blonds eyes flittered to the thirty or so walkers gathered outside the chainlink and then back to Stiles. He could see the wheels turning in his old brother’s head as he studied him, he was beginning to understand what Stiles had in mind.

“Okay.” Jax nodded and began working the lock.

“Ope.” Stiles unhooked the watch from around his wrist and held it out to his other brother. “Time me.”

“Sure.” He looked a little dubious but took the watch.

“You need a gun.” Jax mentioned as he removed the padlock. “You need some kind of weapon if you’re going out there.”

“I got it.” He pushed back the ends of the plaid shirt he wore to reveal the two sheaths connected to his belt.

Jax didn’t seem to be happy about that either, but pulled the gate open anyway. Stiles gave him a reassuring pat on the shoulder as he crossed over the threshold. When it looked as if they might leave the gate open or join him, Stiles grabbed a hold of the chainlink and yanked it closed, separating himself from his brothers.

“No gunfire whatsoever.” He ordered as he removed the knives from their cases. “Start the clock now, Opie.”

The walkers turned to him the moment he spoke. He led them away from the gate, just a few feet. It was a gutsy move, it left his back exposed, but he needed the room to do what needed to be done.
Jax had seen Stiles take out walkers before, when they were clearing out the town. It had been instinctual then, almost systematic. This time was different in a way that made him anxious.

Stiles let the walkers get in close and surround him. His movements were almost graceful. He would shove one blade into the skull of a walker, then make the same move with the second before he even removed the first. He would kick out his foot to knock a walker to the ground, and then bash its head in with the heel of his shoe.

It was when two came at his brother from behind that Jax made a move toward the gate. Opie took the same step, but rather than allowing Jax to open the chainlink and help, he wrapped a large hand around his bicep to stop him.

“No.” Opie pulled him back. “He’s got this.”

Jax turned his gaze to their younger brother in time to see the pair of walkers he was worried about hit the ground. Stiles focus easily returned to the ones in front of him, not even missing a beat. He brought down one walker after another until the bodies were lying scattered in the dirt.

It was a barely noticeable smile on Stiles lips that unsettled something inside of Jax. There was blood of the undead and specks of dirt covering the kid’s skin and clothes, but he didn’t mind at all. He was relaxed, more so than Jax had seen him since he had come back to Charming.

It wasn’t right. It was further proof that Stiles had been out there too long, and not inside the walls long enough. It was the exact reason Jax kept him in town, and did not give him permission him to go on runs.

“What was my time, Opie?” Stiles asked as he made his way through the gate.

“Four minutes and seventeen seconds.” The other man relayed.

“Thirty-three walkers in four minutes and seventeen seconds.” The younger man whistled as he turned his attention on the C.C. team. “That is with one person. You are giving up five minutes of your day to keep this place safe. Five minutes is a waste of your time?”

“It takes longer when we have to stab them through the fence.” Rat Boy pointed out.

“No one told you that was the way you had to do it.” It was the safest way, but not the only way. “You walk out that gate to burn them. You can walk out there to kill them. Take a back-to-back stance, so none of them can get between you.”

“If you count burning time, it is longer than five minutes.” Miles interjected.

“This is not a goddamn negotiation.” Jax snapped at the prospect. “You do the job every fucking morning. If you can’t do that, then you’ll be picking up manure on the farm from sun up to sundown. Do you want me to tell you what will happen if you can’t do either?”

“We’ll be here.” Filthy Phil replied before Miles could object once more.

“You better be.” Jax leveled them each with a withering glare. “Burn those bodies and get to the farm. I’m sure Oswald can find something for you to do.”

He jerked his head to the truck, signaling for his brothers to hop in. They followed him without question, taking the seats they had arrived at the gate in. Jax turned the key in the ignition but stalled on putting the vehicle in reverse.
“Stiles, you’ll work the wall with me tonight.” Jax didn’t normally work the wall, he hadn’t since they started bringing people in, but tonight he would make an exception. “We’re going to have that talk.”

“Awesome.” His younger brother sighed tiredly.

“You got all your stuff for work?” He brought a backpack in with him when they picked him up.

“Yes.”

“I’ll drop you off.” Then he and Opie had to make the rounds to check in with people around town. “How’s Mason working out for you?”

“He’s good. I was thinking he might be better off at the clinic. It wouldn’t take much for Tara or Chibs to train him.” It wasn’t the first time Stiles had brought up the kid finding a new job. “He’s smart. He deserves to be more than an assistant. He’s wasting his talents with me.”

“It was only temporary.” He thought Mason would be more comfortable working with someone from his hometown until he got to know more people in Charming. “Talk to him. See where he wants to be and we’ll see about getting him there.”

“Okay. Thanks, Jax.”

They pulled the cars off the road around noon. They had come across a block-aid of big rigs flipped over in the middle of the road that they could not pass. It forced them to stop and find an alternate route to their destination.

“Out with it.” Lydia placed her hands on her hips and stared Scott down. “We are stuck at a roadblock, heading into unfamiliar territory. We want to know why.”

“We?” The alpha glanced toward the group who were all giving him expectant looks. “It’s complicated.”

“Uncomplicate it.” Chris suggested as he rolled the map out on the hood of the car. “We made a base at Fort Bragg. There better be a damn good reason for us leaving.”

“The men Allison and Kira ran into yesterday mentioned a town they had.” The details had been passed around throughout the group since the girls had returned. “We’re going to check it out.”

“Why?” That was a great question, one he knew would be asked eventually. “We have heard about towns before and we have avoided them at all costs. Why is this one different?”

“Charming was Stiles’ second home.” His mother answered for him. “His older brother lived there.”

“Stiles had an older brother?”

“Jax was his half-brother.” Scott clarified. “Sheriff Stilinski grew up in Charming. Stiles had family there.”

“Had.” Natalie Martin stressed the word. “What makes you think they are still there?”

“If anyone would have gone back to reclaim their town, it would be them.” He had absolutely no
doubts about that. “They have deep roots there and the manpower to take it back.”

“What does that mean?”

“Jax is a second generation Sons of Anarchy member.” His mom admitted hesitantly, as if she were betraying Stiles trust by saying anything. “Stiles’ biological mother was the club founder’s wife.”

“The Sons of Anarchy is one of the most notorious motorcycle gangs in Northern California.” Parrish seemed perplexed by all the information he was being given. “I heard Sheriff Stilinski was a stand-up cop-”

“He was.” His connection to the Sons didn’t change that. “He never helped SAMCRO with anything. He was a good cop, who had a one night stand with the wrong woman, which resulted in Stiles.”

“These people, who you hope will be there, were family to Stiles.” Argent deduced. “Stiles is dead. What is the point of traveling all the way to Charming?”

“Jax knows Scott was important to Stiles.” His mother explained. “He will help us, because it is what Stiles would do.”

“And if Stiles’ brother isn’t the one in Charming?” It was still a very real possibility. “What then?”

“We go back to Fort Bragg.” Or move on to another coastal town. “We will figure it out. We always do.”

The communications tower was a former radio station. Two people worked there, Juice and Sergio. There wasn’t much to do besides attempt to contact other towns that happened to pop up. They had the system going for about six months and so far they had gotten a hold of one group located in Lodi.

When they were not trying to reach others within their radio range, they were trying to keep the system up and running. The thing was ancient and on its last leg before the apocalypse, and it was worse now. Juice had spent a lot of time rewiring the piece of shit, but it never seemed to do much good in the long run.

“Son of a bitch.” He flinched backward as a wire shorted out and sparked. “Piece of shit.”

“You treat it right and it will treat you right.” A voice spoke behind him. “Don’t call it names. Talk to it like you would to talk to your ex-girlfriend, not how she would talk to you.”

“That’s funny.” He glanced over his shoulder to see Stiles in the doorway. “I treat it just fine and it still shocks me. Kinda like my ex-girlfriend.”

“And me?” The younger man leaned against the doorjamb. “Do I shock you?”

“Sometimes. In a good way.” He turned around to take in the other man, noting the plastic bag in his hands. “You braved the diner all on your own, that is definitely shocking.”

“Chucky was working the counter. I didn’t even see Gemma.” Stiles generally did not go near the diner without back up if the matriarch was working.

“What’s the special occasion?” He dropped into an office chair and offered the empty one to Stiles.
“Just thought we would have lunch together.” That was sweet, if not a little suspicious. “I won’t be around for dinner. I’m working the wall with Jax tonight.”

“Makes sense. I heard about the show you put on at the gate this morning.” The prospects were bitching about it on the walkie-talkies. “You either impressed your brother or scared him.”

“I don’t scare people.” Stiles scoffed at the very idea. “Let alone Jax.”

“I think you might actually believe that.” He always did underestimate himself. “Can I have my food, please?”

“Here.” He handed over a styrofoam container and set the other on the table in front of them. “It’s just a sandwich.”

“It’s still food.” They had all gone without at one point or another, more so at the beginning of the end of the world. “Is there another reason for this impromptu lunch date?”

“Well,” There was definitely an ulterior motive here. “Jax wants to talk tonight, about me going outside the walls. I thought I would talk to him too.”

“Yeah, that is usually how a conversation goes.” If there was not participation from both parties then it was basically a lecture.

“I thought I would talk to him about us. You and I.” Oh. “What should I tell him?”

“What do you want to tell him?” He could see how unhelpful he was being from the way Stiles scrunched up his face in irritation. “We started this based on a physical attraction and a need for a connection. In the few months we’ve been together we never really talked about it going beyond sex and fun.”

“Should I move back into my bedroom then? Scrap this talk with Jax completely?” Hurt replaced the aggravation in Stiles expression.

“Don’t move back into the spare room.” It had not been Stiles bedroom for a very long time and he had no intention of letting it be Stiles room again. “I like waking up with you.”

“Oh yeah? Good. I like falling asleep with you.” The younger man's features softened. “Our morning showers together are nice too.”

“They are.” It wasn’t often they found the time to be together that early in the day. “Sharing meals is good too.”

“We shower, sleep, and eat together. Almost like a real couple.” That was pretty much the point. They were a real couple, even if some didn’t see it. “There’s the other thing too. The love thing.”

“There is that.” The words ‘I love you’ had not been uttered between them as of yet. “Full disclosure, I, uh, I do.”

“Yeah, me too.” That was about as romantic as they would get with a declaration of their feelings for each other. “The words, though, I’m not sure if I can…”

“That’s okay. I don’t need to hear it.”

“You say that now.” It might change one day, but as long as Juice knew how Stiles felt, then he didn’t need to hear it. “I’ll work on it.”
“You wanna talk about it?” He had heard Tara and Gemma discussing it one day, but no one was inclined to push Stiles on that particular topic. “You don’t really say it to anyone.”

“The last person I said those words to was my dad.” Stiles averted his gaze to something interesting on the carpet. “I’ve closed myself off emotionally since the death of my father. What a cliché, right?”

“It’s understandable.” There was nothing cliché about it. “You’re wrong, though. You are not closed off. You feel things, I can see that. You don’t have to say you love me or anyone, so long as you let the people you care about see it.”

“I’ll do my best.” Stiles flashed him a small smile. “That was good, by the way. You are good. You could be a shrink or a high school guidance counselor.”

“That’s hilarious.” He was just as messed up as Stiles was, he just hid it better. “Notice I can’t say the words either?”

“I kind of thought you were doing that so I wouldn’t feel as bad for not being able to say them to you.” The younger man theorized.

“Maybe.” He could say them if Stiles really needed to hear them. “Back to the original conversation, what are you telling Jax?”

“That we are in a cohabitatingly serious relationship.”

“I don’t think cohabitatingly is a word.”

“I don’t think Jax knows that.” Fair enough. "I don’t see what the big deal is. He already knows we have sex. I’m pretty sure he has seen us have sex. Knowing it’s more than that should make him feel better, not piss him off.”

“Jax looks at you and sees the little kid you used to be.” That version of Stiles was lost somewhere before the dead rose. “Finding out you are in a committed adult relationship is just another sign you are not the little kid he has to protect.”

“Spoken like a true big brother.”

“Spoken like a little brother who has seen his older brother give him the same look Jax gives to you.” It was an identical expression on the face of every older sibling. “Jax is realizing he can’t protect you from the world, from growing up. My brothers realized they couldn’t protect me from myself.”

“You miss them.” Stiles reached out a hand to grip Juice’s. “Can I ask you a question? A personal one that probably oversteps a ton of boundaries.”

“Sure.”

“Is it easier to believe they’re gone?” By they he assumed Stiles meant his family in New York. “Or do you hope they got out before the bombs?”

“Part of me wants to believe they got out, that they have a camp out there somewhere.” It was a nice thought, one that helped him sleep at night. “Then I go out on runs and I see how it is out there, and I hope they have some kind of peace. I don’t want them out there in the thick of it, fighting to survive every day. If that means they were in Queens when it fell then…”
“Double edged sword.” The outside world was a nightmare, but the only other option was death. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s the same for your dad.” He knew that for a fact. “It’s never going to be okay that he’s gone, but you’re glad he doesn’t have to live in all this.”

“Yeah, that’s true.”

Scouting Charming was easier said than done. They stayed a few miles away and off the road to be safe. The problem was, they were having trouble spotting anything inside of Charming.

“It’s like a damn fortress.” Argent grumbled as he handed over the binoculars. “I’ve got one guy on the wall, with an AK. There is smoke coming off the ground near the chainlink. They were burning something, walker bodies I would guess.”

“The guard on the wall, is he wearing a leather vest?” Scott could just look into the binoculars himself, but seeing as Chris already did, he figured he would just ask.

“A biker kutte? Yeah.” Chris nodded. “I can’t make out the patches unless he turns around.”

“Let me see,” The alpha brought the binoculars up to his eyes to peak through. “I don’t recognize him, but he has to be SAMCRO if he’s guarding Charming.”

“How does the town look?”

“I can’t see much beyond the walls.” They were built high, solid, as if they would keep the devil himself out. “The most I can see is the top of the hospital, which doesn’t look good.”

“They would not have three walls to protect some debilitated ruins.” Lydia muttered. “They have something special in there.”

“What now?”

“I’m gonna go see if there is anyone who could be an ally in there.” He would not go as far as to call Jax Teller a friend. “You guys should wait here.”

“No.”

“You are not going in there alone.” His mother put a full stop on that idea. “If the Sons are not the ones who took back Charming, then the people who did could be very dangerous. If it is them, then there is no telling how they will react when we tell them about Stiles. We all go together or not at all.”

“We go together.”

The clinic was empty, void of patients. Tara was the doctor on call, as always. She was the only one in town with a medical license. Chibs helped out where he could, as did St. Thomas’s former hospital administrator, Margaret Murphy, but neither of them had Tara’s skills.

“If there is not coffee or some other caffeinated beverage in your hands, then please turn around
and walk right back out that door.” The woman in question did not even gaze up from her files to acknowledge him as he joined her in the waiting room. “Come back when you have one of those things.”

“What brand of idiot do you take me for? I know the entry fee.” Jax set the travel mug down on the receptions desk. “We will run out of coffee eventually, just so you know.”

“And you will have a riot on your hands.” She grinned playfully as she took a long sip from the cup. “That would only be from me and your brother. Who knows how the townspeople will react.”

“Let’s hope we don’t find out.” He should probably talk to Oswald about growing some coffee beans. “How are things going here?”

“Slow.” As usual. “I gave my inventory list to Piney yesterday.”

“I know.” That was not why he dropped by in the middle of the day. “You’ve been distracted lately.”

“I know.” She sighed apologetically. “I’m sorry.”

“What’s going on?”

“I’ve got a patient who may have a brain tumor.” The explained the stress that sat heavy on her shoulders. “She’s showing signs, symptoms. Of course, it is only a theory. I don’t have the right equipment to know for sure.”

“The equipment you need…” He could guess where it was.

“Is at St. Thomas.” That is what he was afraid of.

“Can’t you just x-ray her head?” They had an x-ray machine at the clinic, but from the indignant look on her face, that obviously was a idiotic suggestion. “We’ve talked about this. St. Thomas is inhospitable. The whole building is unstable.”

“Which why we need to get what we can out of there now.” It was an old argument, one they had been having since they decided to open the clinic. “There are floors we haven’t cleared yet that have pharmaceuticals and other supplies. There are things in the neonatal unit and oncology ward that we are going to need some day. The MRI machine and CT-scanner are what I need now.”

“Those machines are huge.” It would take a hell of a lot of work to get them out of the hospital. “Not to mention the electricity it will take to power them.”

“We will only use them if absolutely necessary.” Just as they did with the x-ray machine. “And it is necessary, Jackson. This patient with a possible tumor, is a seven year old girl. She is only a little older than Thomas and younger than Abel.”

“Don’t do that.” He didn’t need to know it was one of the children currently at the schoolhouse with his boys. “Where would you even put the machines? They won’t fit in here.”

The clinic was a single story building that had catered to the uninsured before the apocalypse. They only had three rooms for patients, and one was used specifically for those who needed to stay overnight.

“We set up here because it was small, easy to clear, and we needed a medical facility sooner rather than later.” Tara reminded him. “The more people that come in, the bigger space we will need.
Things have settled down. If there was ever an optimal time to move to another building, it would be now.”

“You have some place in mind?” She would not have brought it up if she didn’t.

“There was a family practice on Brighton. It was four floors and a basement.” There was a considerable amount of room compared to the clinic. “More than enough space for the machines. It would also allow me to see more patients.”

“A bigger building means more electricity and water consumption.” They did pretty well on both, but he still had to mention it. “You would have to talk to Juice about getting the new place on the grid, and taking this one off. Then we would need a team to clean out that place and move the inventory and machines over.”

“Can we spare anyone?”

“I don’t know.” He could help out and he knew Tara would get her hands dirty too. “I’ll ask Stiles about putting together a team.”

“Thank you.” She expressed her gratitude sincerely. “Speaking of Stiles, the word on the street is that you are working the wall with him tonight.”

“Word travels fast.” The entire goddamn town was full of gossiping whores.

“I guess that means Stiles won’t be babysitting tonight.” Jax tilted his head in confusion. “And our date is off.”

“Date night.” Shit. He had forgotten about that. “Sorry, babe.”

“It’s fine. I can talk your mom into watching the kids for the night.” He didn’t see the point in that if he was not going to be home. “I can have some quality alone time.”

“What are you going to do by yourself?”

“I’ve got fresh batteries and phallic-shaped vibrating toy in the drawer of my bedside table.” She smirked. “I’m sure I will find something to do.”

“I’m sure you will.” He might have to cut his talk with Stiles short so he could get home early.

“Hey,” Opie’s voice filtered in from the open door. “Sorry to interrupt.”

“What’s going on?” His VP would not break into he and Tara’s afternoon together without a good reason.

“Visitors at the gate.” It had been a while since they had any of those. “Asking for you by name.”

“Anyone we know?” He couldn’t see how a stranger would be throwing his name around.

“The leader of the group introduced himself to Kozik as Scott McCall.” The taller man told him. “I thought we would check it out, make sure it’s legit, before we radio Stiles.”

“The kid has some balls showing up here.” He pushed away from the desk to face his brother. “He has a group?”

“Yep.” Opie nodded. “That’s gotta mean they are looking for a place to call home.”
“That is not going to happen.” His opinion of McCall would have been different a couple years ago, but that was before he knew what kind of man he was.

“That’s not your call.” Tara reasoned. “That decision belongs to Stiles, not either of you, and not the club.”

“This kid and his friends left Stiles to burn.” Not one of his younger brother’s former friends was innocent. “You really want those people in our town?”

“It was Stiles they left behind. Stiles should decide if they stay or not.” She made a good point, but he did not like it one bit. “Do not make any rash decisions without his input, Jackson.”

“I get it. I’ll let Stiles make the final call.” He assured his wife. “I want to see that it is actually Scott before we tell Stiles.”

“Go do it then.” She ordered. “You radio him the minute you know, Jax. He will never forgive you if he finds out you sent his friends away without telling him they were here.”

“I know.” He and Stiles were on shaky ground as it was, one more thing could break them.

He kissed his wife’s cheek before following Opie out to the pickup. He climbed into the passenger seat and removed the pistol from the back of his jeans while Ope hopped into the driver’s seat. He checked the clip of his weapon, ensuring that it was full, before realizing they were still idling in the parking lot of the clinic.

“You gonna start the truck?” He asked as he slid the mag back into place and made sure the safety was on.

“You planning to shoot Scott?” Opie questioned as he turned the key in the ignition.

“The thought had crossed my mind.” Every single time he saw the scars on his brother’s body, he thought about what he would do to Scott if he ever saw him again.

“Stiles doesn’t want him dead.” It was Jax’s first instinct to deny that Stiles had any idea what he wanted, but Opie beat him to it. “He won’t know how he feels about what happened until he see’s Scott and his friends again. If he chooses to banish them from Charming or kill him, which he won’t-“

“What makes you so sure?”

“It’s not who he is. He’s his father’s son, not Gemma’s.” It was more than true. While there were distinct similarities between Stiles and Gemma, Jax always saw more of John in Stiles than anyone. “Even if he did lean more toward the Mayhem side of the family tree, Pop already called dibs on dishing it out.”

“Of course he did.” Piney was incredibly protective of Stiles.

Scott had talked the majority of the pack into staying in the vehicles once they reached the Charming city limits. It was a small effort to keep them from appearing threatening. After speaking with the guard, Kira joined him at the front of the line, just as a pickup came through the chainlink gate.
“Is that them?” She asked as the truck came to a stop and the doors opened.

“Yeah, that’s them.” He braced himself as the men climbed out of the cab.

“Scott McCall.” Jax sauntered over with Opie at his side. “You are probably the last person I expected to darken my doorstep.”

“Some of your guys ran into Allison and Kira on a run yesterday.” He wrapped an arm around the kitsune’s shoulders. “They said they had a town in Charming. I just thought we would stop in.”

“And?” Opie seemed bored by his mere presence, which wasn’t anything new. He was certain that was Opie’s default expression. “You just packed up your crew and came to say hi?”

“I didn’t come here to ask for anything, not for you to let us into Charming.” He wanted a safe place for his pack to go, and seeing the walls they had here made him believe it was the right place, but he would not stay where they were not wanted. “I came here to tell you about Stiles.”

“He’s not with you.” Jax noted.

“No. H-he’s…” He stumbled over the words before forcing them from his throat. “He’s dead. He died.”

“Dead.” The older man’s eyes flickered to Opie, but he remained calm and composed. “How?”

“Scavengers attacked our camp.” It was easier to say that then to go into specifics. “It was almost three years ago now.”

“What about John?” Opie brought up the other Stilinski. “Where is he?”

“The scavengers killed him too.” That was an image he would never be able to wipe from his mind.

“They’re both dead?”

“Yes.” They both died on the same day, there was something comforting about that. “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, me too.” Jax replied sadly. “I know how close you and my brother were. It’s because of that, that I can’t open the gate for you. I can’t tell the people in town that you’re a good person and have them believe me. My opinion is biased. So I can’t make that call.”

“The person who can is on his way.” Opie made some kind of hand gesture to the guard as he spoke. “You just stay right there.”

“Okay.”

He was enjoying himself far too much. Sticking around the communications tower to bug Juice rather than going back to work was the best choice he had made all day. Juice probably didn’t think so, though.

“Would you quit?” The other man smacked his hand away. “I’m trying to work.”

“So work.” He skimmed the tips of his fingers lightly against the nape of Juice's neck, causing him to shiver. “No one is stopping you.”
“Except you.” He jerked out from under Stiles touch. “Don’t you have your own work to do?”

“Paperwork.” It would still be there when he returned to his office. “I hate paperwork. I’m having more fun here.”

“I can tell.” Juice chuckled as Stiles went for his neck again. “Stop.”

“Make me.” He challenged, leaning back in his chair and spreading his legs, leaving enough room for another person between them.

“Is that what you want?” The older man dropped the wire cutters and rolled his own chair closer. “Didn’t get enough this morning?”

“We didn’t get to finish this morning.” They were rudely interrupted by their Scottish roommate. “I won’t be around tonight. We’re both here now.”

“That is true.” Juice licked his lips and ran his hands up and down Stiles thighs. “You wanna lock the door or take this back to our place?”

“That’s a no on both, boys.” Speak of the Scottish devil and he shall appear to interrupt them once again.

“Cockblock.” Stiles hissed under his breath. “What do you want?”

“Visitors at the gate.” Chibs informed them. “Need you to vet ‘em, Stiles.”

“I don’t deal with newcomers until the trial period is over.” He did not interact with them until they were sure they wanted to make a place for themselves in Charming.

“You are going to want to meet with these ones.” That sounded ominous. “Jax and Opie are already there. We’re waiting on you.”

“You need me too?” Juice asked as they both stood from their seats.

“No.” Chibs held up a hand as if to physically stop Juice from going anywhere. “Got two overprotective brothers out there, don’t need an overprotective lover too.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Do you have the truck?” The Scot shook his head in response to Stiles question. “I’m not riding bitch on your bike.”

“Take mine.” Juice offered, removing his keys from his pocket. “I’ll walk home or you can pick me up when I get off work. Radio me and let me know.”

“I will.” He leaned in to give Juice a peck on the lips. “I’ll see you later. Hopefully.”

He grabbed his walkie-talkie off the table and clipped it to his belt before trailing Chibs down the stairs. The Scot was tense, which made him nervous, but he didn’t mention it. He mounted Juice’s bike, put on his helmet, and fired her up before allowing Chibs to lead the way to the gates.

They parked beside the row of bikes just outside the innermost wall. Chibs stayed put while Kozik opened the gate for him. If the parade of Sons surrounding the area did not set off alarm bells in his head, then seeing Opie and Jax waiting for him just outside the chainlink as Kozik let him through sure did.
“This one is your call.” Jax used his body to block his view of the people waiting to be let in or turned away. “I trust your instincts.”

“All right.” That was good to know, but he had figured that out for himself a long time ago. “Can we do this?”

“Yeah.” Jax and Opie both stepped out of the way. They each took a place on opposite sides of him as if they were bracketing him from an oncoming threat.

With his view unobstructed, he could finally see the group and vehicles parked on the road. His eyes immediately found Scott, who looked as if he were seeing a ghost. The atmosphere around them fell silent and still for only a few seconds before car doors began slamming open.

“Stiles.” Scott addressed him breathlessly as the pack poured out of the convoy of vehicles. The sight of them spurred Stiles out of his surprised state and into action.

“Let them in.” He spoke to his brothers, not taking his eyes off his former pack mates.

“You sure about that?” It was clear from Opie’s tone that he did not agree with his choice at all, and the look on Jax’s face mirrored that sentiment.

“We don’t turn people away.” Everyone who showed up was given a chance. “Let them in.”

Chapter End Notes

TUMBLR
Youtube
Thank you for all the comments and kudos, they are greatly appreciated.
There was an old bed and breakfast located about a mile from the gates. It was cleaned out and renovated before they began allowing strangers into Charming. It was the place newcomers rested while they decided whether they wanted to stay in Charming or return to the road.

Gemma was usually the one to get the visitors settled in. She was the only person who could be equal parts terrifying and welcoming. Two Sons guarded the exits, keeping anyone from coming and going after curfew. The time restriction was only implemented for strangers, seeing as they could not be trusted without further evaluation.

Things were a bit different this time around. The group they had let in were not strangers. They were aware of what these people had done and could do. They couldn’t be trusted, so extra precautions were taken.

Jax put Tig and Happy on guard, knowing they would not let one person slip past them. Rather than heading to clubhouse to assess the situation, Jax stuck around the inn to help Gemma get everyone where they were supposed to be.

“This is where you will be staying for the time being.” Jax led the visitors into the lobby, showing them the couches they could sit on. “Gemma will show you to your rooms in a little while. If you need something from your cars, you will have to grab it before sundown.”

“Why sundown?” A middle-aged man with a crossbow inquired.

“Curfew.” He would not let people unfamiliar with his town roam the streets in the middle of the night. “You can go out again at 8:00am tomorrow morning. You can explore the town and see how we do things here. You have one week.”

“For what?” Scott’s mother Melissa questioned.

“To figure out if you want to stay in Charming or leave.” He was hoping they would choose the latter. “If you stay, you will be interviewed, given a job, and a house. Until the week is up, you will be here.”

“And if we want to leave?” A raven-haired young woman spared a glance toward the door, as if she was already regretting coming in.

“You can go at any time.” They did not keep prisoners or hostages. “This isn’t a charity. Nothing is free. While you’re in the B&B, you will keep it clean. There is food in the kitchen, you will cook for yourselves. Gemma is not here to do your bidding.”

“We understand.” Scott assured him. “We can take care of ourselves.”
“You’re not taking our weapons.” The man with a crossbow gripped it tighter as he stared Jax down.

“We never said we were going to.” They had not brought up weaponry at all. “We don’t want anything you have, and that’s a promise.”

“We should believe that, because you’re bikers with hearts of gold?” The redhead scoffed at the very idea of it. “Or because you let us in?”

“I didn’t let you in.” He never would have. “Stiles did that. I am the one who will see you out if I feel it’s necessary. You’d do well to remember that.”

“Stiles,” Of course Scott would latch on to the name instead of listening to what Jax had to say. “Where is he? Where did he go after he left the gate?”

“Back to work.” He had gone home, actually, but these people did not need to know that. “He’s not your concern. He wasn’t when you fled Port Angeles and he’s not now.”

“We thought he was dead.”

“Well,” A dark haired man who stood apart from the rest interjected. “We didn’t exactly stick around to watch him burn.”

“Peter.” The twenty-something standing beside Scott snapped.

“I appreciate your honesty.” He and this Peter guy may get along just fine if that continued. “Do you have any questions?”

“Can I see Stiles before curfe-“

“No.” If Jax had his way, none of these people would cross his brother’s path anytime soon. “Any questions that aren’t about my brother?”

“How long has Stiles been here?” Scott really must have been hard of hearing.

“What did I just say?” He glared at Stiles former BFF.

“Jax.” Tig opened the entrance door and peeked inside. “The kid's here for the intake.”

“Send him in.” They could finally get this show on the road. “Our representative from the community center will ask you a few things, and then let you get on with your night. You might know him. He’s from Beacon Hills too.”

“Hey Jax.” The younger man greeted him with a smile.

“Hey.” He waved him in. “Thanks for coming.”

“Mason!” One of the teenagers in McCall’s group blurted out in surprise.

“Liam!” Mason dashed around Jax to throw his arm around the other kid. “Oh my god! I can’t believe you’re here. I never thought I would see you again.”

“Dude,” Liam chuckled in delight. “Right before the evacuation center I was in fell, I heard about the one your family was taken to. I thought you were dead.”

“There’s a lot of that going around.” Jax muttered under his breath. “Mason, I’m glad you found
“I know.” Mason pulled out of the embrace. “I’ll get it done. No worries. I’ve got the paperwork.”

“You give that to Gemma when you’re finished, all right?” The kid shot him a confused look, which was not unwarranted considering Gemma did not normally deal with the intake forms. “She’ll get them where they need to go. That way you can stay here and hang out with your friend instead of dropping those off.”

“Cool. I’ll do that. Thanks.”

“I’m gonna head out. I’ve got a date with the wife.” His boys would be third wheeling, but there was nothing he could do about that. “Tig and Hap will be outside, if you have any problems.”

“I’ll be fine. Have a good night.”

Scott watched Jax walk out the door, while Gemma took a seat in the chair behind the receptions counter. The older woman seemed content to pretend to ignore them. Mason, who Scott had never met before but Liam obviously had, was grinning from ear to ear as he handed a clipboard over to his friend.

“So, you need to write your name, age, where you’re originally from, and how long you have been with your group.” The teenager informed them.

“Okay.” Liam grasped the pen between his fingers and started listing his information.

“You all look uninjured.” Mason gave them each a quick once-over. “If you need to see a doctor, let me know, and we can get you into our clinic in the morning.”

“You have a clinic?”

“Uh huh. We have a real doctor and everything.” A real doctor, that was something they had not been in the presence of for a long time.

“Tara?” Scott recalled Stiles sister-in-law being a doctor. “The doctor is Jax’s wife Tara, right?”

“Yep. You knew Jax before?” Before meaning before the apocalypse.

“Yeah.” He had spent many of Stiles' birthdays with the SAMCRO pres. “His brother Stiles is my best friend.”

“Awesome. I work with Stiles. He’s like my boss, but he hates when I call him that.” Mason laughed as he took the clipboard from Liam and passed it to Malia. “He’s cool. I can radio him and let him know you’re here.”

“He knows they’re here.” Gemma spoke up. “He met them at the gate.”

“You can still radio him, though.” Scott noted the walkie-talkie hanging out of the kid’s jacket pocket. “Tell him to come over.”

“No.” The Sons of Anarchy matriarch slammed a hand down on the counter. “If he wanted to be here, he would be.”
“Intense. Uh, I’m sensing there is something I don’t know.” Mason deduced awkwardly. “So, I’m not going to radio Stiles, but when I see him tomorrow, I’ll tell him you would like to meet with him.”

“Thank you.” That was probably the best compromise they were going to get, given the circumstances. “How long have you been in Charming?”

“I’ve been here since the beginning of summer.” It was early fall now, the temperature only just starting to cool down. “I’m glad I got here when I did. I don’t think I could have handled another winter out there, even a California one.”

“Understandable.” Winters were harsh when you had no real shelter. “Are there others from Beacon Hills? Besides you and Stiles?”

“A few.” Mason nodded but did not offer up any names. “If I can get out of work early tomorrow, I can take you around town, see if you recognize anyone.”

“That would be great. Thanks.”

The sun was setting when he finally allowed himself to go home. It had taken everything he had not to leave the tower the moment he heard who had come through the gates. The only thing that stopped him was the knowledge that Stiles would kick his ass for trying to coddle him.

He almost regretted his choice when he trudged into the dimly lit house. Stiles was at the kitchen table, a half-empty bottle of scotch in front of him, and a full glass of amber liquid in his hands. The silence of the room was enough to tell him it was only the two of them at home.

“Wanna talk about it?” Juice figured he would get the pointless questions out of the way first.

“No.” Yeah, he didn’t think so.

“You hungry?”

“No.”

“You drunk?”

“Not yet.” He was steadily working his way there. “Want a drink?”

“Pour me one.” He grabbed a glass from the cupboard and slid it across the table.

“I thought I’d see you sooner.” Stiles mused as he filled the cup.

“I didn’t want to crowd you.” He slipped off his kutte and draped it over the back of a chair.

“So you didn’t swing by the transition house on your way home?” Stiles was the only one who referred to the inn as a transition house, which made it seem more like sober living than a bed and breakfast. “You didn’t warn off the new group?”

“Piney may have done a drive-by, but we did not stop or get out of the truck.” They both wanted to, but neither did. “We kept our distance.”

“Hmm.” Stiles took a sip from his glass as he eyed the bottle once more. “This is a bad idea. I’ll
never make it to the wall tonight.”

“You’re off the hook for that. Jax isn’t going either. He put Bobby up there for the night shift.”

The brothers weren’t up for it, so the next Son in line took the task. “We have to be at the clubhouse for breakfast in the morning. Pres’s orders.”

“When did you talk to him?”

“He talked to Piney after he left the inn. Piney relayed everything to me when he dropped me off.”

He was forced to hitch a ride with the old man when his bike never showed back up and neither did Stiles. “You don’t have to worry about the wall or anything. You’re good for the night.”

“How about tomorrow? Am I good for that?” That was a loaded question and they both knew it. “My mind is sort of going in twelve different directions. It’s all clouded. I can’t really see past the gate this afternoon and into the new day tomorrow.”

“The scotch probably isn’t helping.” Thought he couldn’t blame him for having a few drinks. “Is that Chibs’ bottle?”

“It might be.” The Scot was going to be pissed when he found out. “I’m sure he’ll forgive me just this once.”

“A bottle of moonshine might put him in a forgiving mood.” Piney and Bobby may or may not have set up a distillery behind the clubhouse. “You sure you don’t want to talk about what happened at the gate?”

“I never expected to see any of them again.” Stiles shook his head as if he were shaking off bad thoughts.

“Did you want to?”

“I don’t know.” He huffed out a breath. “And now here they are, alive and well, inside our walls.”

“Grateful or disappointed?” Was he happy that they were still breathing, that they were here, or did he wish they had stayed away?

“Both, I think.” He snorted derisively. “Does that make me a horrible person?”

“It makes you human.” An awful person would have sent them away to punish them. Stiles had offered them another shot at survival. “A rare sight these days.”

“True enough.” He agreed before gulping down the rest of his drink. “There are leftovers in the fridge, if you’re hungry. I know it’s my night to cook.”

“I’m not hungry.” They could eat the leftovers tomorrow for lunch. “Want to call it an early night? The laptop has a full charge. We can put in a DVD and watch a movie in bed.”

“That sounds good.”

“Let’s go. Leave the bottle.” It might buy them some good will with Chibs if they left some of the alcohol for him.

“Fine.”
Port Angeles had been their sanctuary. Now it was a war zone. There were bullets flying and the house was on fire. Even through the panic and the chaos, people were rushing around, gathering what little they could salvage from the wreckage.

“Go out the back door.” Scott ordered. “Be careful. Don’t let them see you.”

“There’s no chance of that.” Peter claimed, glancing out what was left of the front window. “They’re all dead.”

“Then what is he shooting at?” Argent grunted as he hefted a plastic tub into his arms. “He’s going to draw in every walker in a ten mile radius with that gunfire.”

“He’s taking out the walkers closing in on the house.” Cora reported as she took her own peek outside. “He’s giving us a safe route out of here.”

“Let’s make it count.” Lydia guided her mother to the door. “The house is unstable. We have to get out of here before it collapses.”

“Get the cars loaded.” Scott urged them toward the exit. “I’ll get Stiles.”

“What about Sheriff Stilinski? We can’t just leave him out there.”

“There is nothing we can do for him now.” It broke his heart to think of the sheriff’s body being left to the biters, but they had no other choice. “Go load up the cars.”

Most of the back hall was in flames, thanks to a few well-aimed arrows and some flammable books on a shelf. Scott had to dodge the burning debris beginning to fall as he jogged up the stairs. Stiles was at the landing window, with his rifle still aimed at the yard, continuously firing off rounds.

“Stiles,” He called out, noting the blood pouring from his brother’s left arm. “We have to go.”

The only response was the repetition of rapid gunfire. Stiles was so focused on what he was doing, on killing, that he could not hear what was being said. Scott moved in closer, reaching out to touch Stiles shoulder and capture his attention.

“Hey, Stiles.” He gave him a little shake. “Stiles, it’s time to go.”

“Go.” The human shoved him off.

“I am not leaving you here.” He couldn’t do that, he wouldn’t. “I’m sorry about your dad, Stiles. I am. I loved him too. He wouldn’t want you to die here.”

“I don’t plan on dying here.” Stiles pushed him again, sending him back several feet. “There are walkers at the perimeter. They will pick you off before you get everyone out. I will shoot the ones who get close. I’ll make a break for the RV once everyone else is in a vehicle.”

“Stiles-“

“I’ll hold them back.” Stiles insisted. “You get them out. I’ll meet you when it’s clear.”

“You’ll come down?” He would not leave the second floor until he knew Stiles would follow him out.

“I’ll come down.” He brought his gaze up from his scope to meet Scott’s eye. “I promise, Scott. Now go.”
With that assurance in mind, Scott left Stiles to his work and bolted down the stairs. He was nearly sideswiped by a falling ceiling fan as he grabbed the last few garbage bags full of supplies before making his way out of the house. Stiles was doing what he said he would, picking off the walkers that got within thirty feet of the pack while they finished loading up.

“Where is he?” His mom questioned as she took the bags from him and threw them into the trunk.

“He’s coming.” He spied the other members of their group stalling by their cars. “He’s waiting on us. Everyone needs to get in and be prepared to drive. He won’t come down until he knows we’re safe.”

The pack did as they were told, including his mother. They piled into the cars as if their lives depended on it. They had developed a symmetry in gearing up to go that came with having to do it so many times before.

“Stiles!” He yelled over the sound of gunfire, engines running, and walkers groaning. “Stiles! Come on! We have to leave!”

He let out a sigh of relief as the barrage of bullets halted and the barrel of the rifle disappeared from the window. He focused his hearing on footsteps on the creaking stairs while he took several steps away from the car, hoping to get a better view through the open door. With a clear line of sight, he could see Stiles reach the bottom step.

“Stiles! Hurry!” All at once, as if his voice commanded it, the house began to crumble. He watched in horror, as Stiles was lost beneath the wall of fire and debris. “Stiles!”

“Scott, you can’t!” Allison slammed an arm across his chest to keep him from running in after his best friend. “It’s too dangerous.”

“He couldn’t have survived that.” Chris said as he grabbed a handful of Scott’s shirt to pull him back. “He’s gone. He gave his life to give us a chance, let’s not make his death pointless.”

“We can’t leave him behind.” His mom started to climb out of the car, as if she might go in and retrieve Stiles herself. “We can’t.”

“He is buried beneath a pile of burning rubble.” Isaac gestured toward the house from the window of the RV. “He’s dead. We will be to if we don’t leave. The walkers are closing in. We have to go.”

“He’s right.” Allison agreed, urging Scott to the car. “Come on. There’s nothing we can do for him. He’s gone, Scott.”

“Allison…” He tried once more, even as he allowed himself to be led away.

“He’s gone. I’m sorry.”

Scott blinked up into the darkness, the memory of that morning fresh in his mind. He dreamt of that day often. Losing Sheriff Stilinski, who had acted as father to him for so long, and losing Stiles, his brother, within an hour of each other had nearly crippled him. If it had not been for his mom and the pack, he didn’t know if he would have recovered from it.

Everything was different now. What he believed yesterday was not true today. He did not lose his brother three years ago. He allowed himself to be convinced that Stiles was dead before he was even in the car. It was a lie. He saw that now.
Stiles was alive. He had come through the gate with Jax and Opie at his side. He had looked at their pack with surprise and then a well placed blank mask. Scott was so shocked to see his brother that he could not feel hurt by how Stiles had walked away without a word to them.

Thinking about it, he could not really blame Stiles or Jax and Opie for their reactions. He and the pack had left Stiles in a burning house. They looked back, had second thoughts, but they did not turn around. They didn’t go back and they should have. They should have made sure Stiles was dead, put him down if he had turned, or rescued him if he had lived. They did not do any of that. They just drove off. They left Stiles and Sheriff Stilinski to rot.

“How could we do that?”

“Scott?” Kira spoke his name softly from her place beside him.

“We just left him there.” They had fought off a pack of werewolves turned walkers to get Erica’s body. They refused to let Boyd be ripped apart by a herd. They had given them proper burials, like good people did. “Stiles and his dad…we just left them.”

“I wasn’t with your group yet, not then.” Kira and her parents had joined the pack months after Port Angeles. “But I’m sure you did everything you possibly could.”

“We didn’t.” They should have gone back. They never should have left the Stilinski’s for the biters or the fire. “We left them. Sheriff Stilinski was dead. I know that. Stiles…we left him. He’s my brother and I just…. How could I do that?”

His chest was on fire, both from the smoke he was inhaling and the flames licking the skin of his torso and shoulders, courtesy if of the wooden beam that had fallen from the ceiling. It pinned him down, its weight crushing his upper body. It took several moments for his eyes to adjust to the hazy room, but once they had, he realized it was not just the support beam on fire, but the entire house, and he was going to burn up with it.

Of all the ways he thought he would bite the dust, this was not one of them. Heart disease or Alzheimer’s? Sure, they both ran in his family. A rogue, out of control, supernatural creature? On the list since Scott had been turned. Accident caused by misuse of a weapon? Not misuse on his part, but yeah, it was possible. Viciously murdered by someone he knew, because they were tired of listening to him speak? As often as his throat was threatened to be ripped out, he could not discount the likelihood of that. Walker bite? It was currently the leading cause of death. Burned alive in a stranger’s house? Never crossed his mind.

In all honesty, he could still be bitten before he burned completely. If there was not a herd heading for the house already, because of the ruckus the scavengers had made, then the fire would surely catch their eye. They were almost like incredibly dangerous toddlers, sound and shiny things caught their attention.

The walkers didn’t really bother him, he could more than handle his own with them on a normal day. Scavengers were worse, much worse. Monsters disguised as humans. They ran through groups, raided towns. They wanted what you had, your home, your safety, the supplies that kept you alive, or even just you. If you were not willing to give it, then they would take it. Scavengers were why his father was lying dead on the front lawn. They were why the pack were forced to flee their makeshift home, and why Stiles would burn up with the house if he didn’t do something.
If he didn’t do something. Part of him wanted to let the fire consume him. There was no reason for him to get up. His family was gone. His dad was all he had left and he had watched a scavenger put a bullet in his head. He had never lived a day without his dad, and he wasn’t sure if he knew how or if he even wanted to.

Thoughts of his father seemed to conjure his image. He could see him, standing not five feet away, with a pensive expression marring his features. There was tightness around his eyes, an aura of anger and disappointment directed at Stiles. He knew it was because he was stalling. He was actively breaking the promise they had made, to survive no matter how bad things got.

“Okay.” He nodded to the hallucination of his dad. “Okay. I’ll get up.”

Getting up proved easier said than done. He could not shimmy out his way out from under the pillar he was trapped beneath. He was forced to stick his hands against the burning wood to push it off him, crying out when the heat seared the flesh of his palms.

His shirt was in tatters, cloth disintegrated by the flames, leaving the red and blistered skin of his chest exposed. It made the task of standing that much harder, when the only thing he wanted to do was scream as his skin bunched together as he staggered to his feet. He bit back moans of pain as he stumbled over one thing or another, trying to find a way out of the debilitated house.

The only safe route out was through the kitchen, which was just off the hall on the other side of the room. Once there, he was able to find a dishtowel that he could tear into two pieces and tie around his hands. He also came across a bowie knife that had been discarded by the sink, the only weapon he would have now that his rifle was lost.

The exit was out the backdoor. It led to a fifteen-foot wide patch of grass and a steep cliff that had a long drop to the ocean below. He would have to maintain a careful balance between the burning house and the cliff side, and hope the walkers had not yet invaded the small area.

He gripped the knife firmly in one of his mangled hands, ignoring the discomfort it caused, as he steeled himself for what he would face outside. He turned the knob slowly, hoping that he would not be out on his own for long.

Stiles startled awake with his breath caught in his throat. It took him a few seconds to realize he was pinned down again, but instead of a support beam, it was strong hands on his chest. It was not smoke and fire surrounding him now, but a familiar body hovering over him.

“Just breathe.” Juice rubbed his blunt fingernails soothingly over his torso. “All right?”

“What happened?” There had to be a reason he and Juice had both woken up in the dead of night.

“You were screaming.” The older man looked down at him in concern. “Bad dream?”

“Yeah.” Although the yelling didn’t usually start until he made it around the house and saw his father’s corpse in the yard. “The worst.”

“I’m not surprised.” He shouldn’t be. It was not the first time Stiles had woken up with the phantom feeling of flames on his skin. “Been a while since you had a bad one.”

“No panic attack this time.” He had become violent, though, if the way Juice had him held down said anything. “Did I hurt you?”

“No.” Juice relinquished his hold, lying back down beside him. “Are you okay?”
“Am I ever?” It would be easy to deflect, to say ‘yeah’ and let it drop, but he had taken the easy way out long enough. “Seeing everyone…it brought it all back to the forefront of my mind. Not that it was ever really gone.”

“Aside from our walk through the woods, you haven’t said much about your time with your friends.” ‘Said much’ was a nice way to say it. He had not said a damn word about it since that walk in the woods. “You don’t have to tell me, but you should tell someone.”

“Maybe.”

“Jax hasn’t pushed you, because he doesn’t want to bring up bad memories for you.” Anything that had to do with his time with the pack was tainted by the death of his father. Jax knew what kind of feelings that brought up. “He’ll ask now, because your past has landed in our town.”

“I want to tell him.” He had tried once or twice, when he was still confined to a bed in the clubhouse during his first few days in Charming. “I usually turn to Piney when I’m seeking counsel.”

“Piney will listen, if you feel more comfortable with him.” Of course he would, Piney always listened.

“I need it to be Jax.” Maybe it would help close the distance that had grown between them. “What time do we need to be at the clubhouse for breakfast?”

“Seven.” Jesus, that was early. “Enough time for us to eat and get to work on time. It’s 5:15 now. You getting up or going back to sleep?”

“Are you gonna stay up or go back to bed?”

“I don’t know.” Juice shrugged. “Do you have something in mind?”

“Another movie?” They hadn’t run the battery on the laptop down yet. “A short one.”

“Sure.” He leaned off the side of the bed to snatch the computer off the dresser. “We’ll tell Chibs you were screaming ‘cause you had a nightmare about what he was going to do to you when he found out you drank his last bottle of scotch.”

“Sounds good.” He had a healthy fear of that retaliation that would surely be coming once their roommate found out. “You’ll protect me from him, right?”

“I would step in front of a bullet for you, even if you were the one who fired it. Getting between Chibs and his scotch….” Dangerous territory indeed. “You knew what you were getting into.”

“Can’t I get some leniency here?” There were extenuating circumstances. “Emotional distress.”

“Ask Chibs for clemency at breakfast.” He would do that just as soon as he worked up a few fake tears and prayed they were still as effective as they were when he was a kid. “Maybe while you’re discreetly trying to hide behind one of your brothers.”

“I hide behind Piney.” The old man was his go-to safety zone when he was being picked on by club members. “And it has never been discreet.”

“If you didn’t whimper out his name and dart behind him like a skittish cat…”

“That system has worked well for me since I was little.” If it ain’t broke don’t fix it. “No one goes
toe-to-toe with Piney and lives to tell the tale. Also, it helps that I’m his favorite.”

“Favorite or not, he may sympathize with Chibs. He likes his scotch too.” True, but Piney was already in an overprotective mood and Stiles could benefit from that.

“Scotch is only a drink.” It was not Chibs first born, for fucksake.

“His last bottle of scotch in the apocalypse.” Yeah, hard liquor was pretty hard to come by.

“It’s not like I drank it all. I left some of it.” That had to count for something.

“His last bottle.”

“Fuck.”

The club tried to gather once a week for a big family breakfast. It was generally a lighthearted affair to help them unwind after a stressful couple of days. This time around, everyone was tightly wound but trying to act as if they weren’t.

“You’re worried.” Tara noticed as she sat beside Jax at the table. “About the new arrivals.”

“I don’t trust them.” He had absolutely no reason to.

“We don’t trust anyone who comes through the gates.” It was their default setting. “This is personal.”

“It is personal.” The newcomers were not all strangers and they had done a serious amount of damage to one of their own. “I don’t want them in Charming.”

“And Stiles doesn’t want Jarry here, but she still is.” Stiles had never outright said anything about it, but it was pretty clear. “It is the price we pay to be good people in a rough world.”

“I miss being an outlaw.” Simpler times then. He did not have to worry about how it might look to send a group of survivors away. He just had to think about his family and club. “I could tell them to fuck off without a second thought.”

“It’s not your decision.” Banishment was a council decision, though one separate from the city council. “It’s his.”

Jax looked over to the bar where Stiles was making a plate of food. Well, it was more like he was glancing at the platters and moving on without actually putting any food on his plate. When he was finished, he took the chair to Jax’s right, with only toast and a cup of coffee for a morning meal. Gemma fixed that quickly, coming up behind him and dumping scrambled eggs onto his plate.

“I don’t care if you’re hungover, toast is not all you’re eating.” Gemma and Stiles relationship was strained on the best day, but she had been trying harder to stay on his good side, to be more maternal, since Stiles had been orphaned.

“Have some bacon too.” Opie tossed a few slices from his own plate onto their brothers as he took a chair next to him.

“And sausage.” Jax pushed a few links on to Stiles plate from his own. “You’re eating all of that.”
“Fine.” A placid Stiles at the breakfast table was never a good thing. “Where are the boys?”

“Dawn’s watching them.” They did not want the kids present for this particular discussion. “There are some things we need to talk about. McCall and his group.”

“I know you’re pissed that I let the pack in.” The pack, yeah, Stiles and Juice had explained exactly what that was a couple of months back when they had a run in with an omega. “It was the right thing to do, regardless of our feelings about them.”

“That’s your opinion.” Piney grumbled from the other end of the table. “The rest of us think they should be out on their asses.”

“They are already inside our walls and will continue to be there if they decide to stay.” Jax cut off whatever rant that was building on the old man’s tongue. “We need to decide how to handle them if they do stay.”

“Handle them?” Stiles picked at his food with a fork as he turned his suspicious gaze on Jax. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“We all know they aren’t going anywhere.” Not by their own freewill anyway. “We need to decide how we make them part of our community.”

“The same way we do everyone else who comes through the gates. We don’t treat them any differently than we do the other citizens of Charming.” Stiles maintained the same point he made at the gate when he didn’t turn them away.

“You’re beginning to sound like a real politician.” He was unsure of whether or not that was a bad thing or a good thing. “But these people are not strangers.”

“Some of them are. I didn’t recognize half the people out there with Scott.” Then they could treat half of them like human beings, not like the enemy. “The people in Charming don’t know them or what they have done. If they see you treating them like shit then they’re going to start asking questions.”

“I don’t care what people think.” He was well aware that he should, as the leader of the town, but in this situation he couldn’t care less. “We all have our own problems with your old crew. That doesn’t matter. We need to figure out how to coexist with them and where they would fit best in Charming.”

“You don’t need to figure out anything. That’s my job.” Stiles spit out job like it was a dirty word, a testament to how much he enjoyed his profession. “The job you gave me.”

“No one is going to fault you for passing the buck to someone else just this once.” There were plenty of people who were capable of integrating the newcomers. “Let one of us do it.”

“No offense, but none of you knows how this town works the way I do. I deal with the day-to-day bullshit. You deal with what you want to deal with and shuck off what you don’t.” It was not as simple as that but Jax wouldn’t mention it just yet. “I interview new arrivals and give them jobs, because I know what the hell is going on and who would fit where.”

“I know, but-“

“But nothing. It is my job and I will do it.” Stiles inherited all the stubbornness of the family, Jax should have expected his argument. “Truth is, after all this time, they’re all strangers to me too. It would be irresponsible to treat them as if we haven’t missed a day.”
“I have concerns.” How could he know after what the McCall pack had done. “I want them on restricted access until further notice. Not until the council decides they are trustworthy, but until I do. Completely restricted, until I say otherwise.”

“Completely restricted means what?” Stiles furrowed his brows at Jax’s wording. “Every citizen has some measure of access somewhere. We’ve never completely restricted anyone.”

“Scott’s mother was a nurse, right?” He had a vague recollection of seeing her in scrubs at the hospital in Beacon Hills when Stiles was admitted for one reason or another. “You are going to assign her to the clinic.”

“That’s where she’s needed.” They did not have one certified nurse on staff.

“I agree.” The more trained medical professionals they had the better. “But she will not have keys to the medicine locker or the clinic itself. She goes through Tara, Chibs, or Margaret to get anything she needs for a patient.”

“You think they’ll rip us off?” There was no lack of disbelief in Stiles tone.

“We can’t afford to take that risk.” Plus, they had never let anyone they didn’t know, who wasn’t from Charming, work in the clinic. “The pack does not get direct access to our main food and water supplies, or the electrical grid. They are supervised at all times on whatever job they land, until I say otherwise.”

“Okay.” Stiles agreed a little too easily.

“Okay?” He expected more of fight on that, some kneejerk reaction that would have his brother defending his friends. “You feeling okay, kid?”

“No.” An honest answer, that was a switch from the usual fine he usually replied with.

“Half a bottle of finely aged scotch not settling well in your stomach?” There was little heat behind Chibs scowl but it got a reaction from the kid anyway.

“Piney.” Stiles shot a panicked glance to the old man. “Little help?”

“I got a bottle of Johnnie Walker with your name on it, Chibs.” The older Winston assured Chibs then turned a gaze on Stiles. “I’ve got a list of special items for the next run and chores for you. Fair?”

“Fair.”

Apparently, the Sons took curfew very seriously. The two that had been guarding the door had refused to let them leave the inn after sunset, and would not anyone go out to their vehicles when they awoke the next morning. Derek learned that when he tried to walk out the front door to take in some fresh air not long after climbing out of bed.

“Couldn’t sleep?” Derek asked as he joined Scott in the kitchen after his failed attempt at freedom.

“I’m not used to the soft bed.” They had spent the last few years in tents on the ground or hard floors. “It’s a nice change, but it will take some getting used to.”

“Yeah.” If they were allowed the time to adjust to it all. “Have you spoken to Allison or Chris?”
“Not since dinner last night.” They turned in early, heading off to bed shortly after cleaning up. “Why?”

“I overheard them talking.” He had not been eavesdropping on purpose, but it was hard to ignore them when they were talking in the hall outside his room. “They aren’t sure Charming is the right place for the pack.”

“We haven’t even been here a day.” It was hard to draw conclusions about anything in such a small amount of time.

“Stiles brother rubbed them the wrong way.” Which was probably the point of that whole show. “They think Stiles being here is clouding your judgment, you are too emotionally invested to make the decision that would be beneficial to the pack.”

“Is that what you think?”

“We’re all invested in this.” Some for Stiles, others for the safe haven the town seemed to offer. “We haven’t been here long enough to make an informed decision. We need to weigh the pros and cons of this place.”

“We know it has walls, security, and medicine.” Those things were all rarely found nowadays.

“I think Argent is fixated on the fact that the town is run by an ‘outlaw biker gang.’” Considering Argent came from a family of murderers, he had no room to judge others.

“That doesn’t mean they are bad people.” It didn’t mean they were good people either. “They gave us a week to decide, right? Let’s take the week. We’ll all talk about whether we should stay or go before we give Jax an answer.”

“It doesn’t matter what we find. You and your mom will stay, Liam too.” Scott and Melissa would stay for Stiles, Liam for his friend Mason. “The Yukimura’s will follow your example and stay.”

“What’s your point?”

“We’ve all stuck together so far.” They had lost people, sure, but no one was ever kicked out of their group or left willingly. “We were out there together for a long time.”

“I know.” They were all more than a little road weary.

“If we settle here, not everyone is going to be happy about it.” It could be Heaven on Earth and still there would be members of their pack that would yearn for the road. “When the week is up, if there are some that want to leave, then we should let them go.”

Jax kept Stiles at the clubhouse long after the others had gone off to work. They moved from the main room to the chapel, appreciating the privacy it provided from the few stragglers still at the bar. Jax sat in his rightful chair, at the head of the table, while Stiles took the spot to his left, where he would hold permanent residence if he ever decided to patch in SAMCRO.

“So why aren’t you feeling like sunshine and roses, kid?”

“I had a dream last night.” Stiles admitted, though Jax knew he really meant nightmare. “About Port Angeles.”
“I’ve wanted to know what happened there since the minute you came home.” He always stopped himself from asking. “I’m ready to listen if you’re ready to tell the story.”

“I don’t even remember why we headed north.” It was an odd choice, especially since his family lived in the opposite direction. “Someone suggested Canada or maybe Alaska. Somewhere it snowed a lot was the endgame, I think.”

“Hard for walkers to move in knee-deep snow.” That might actually be hilarious to watch. “Why Port Angeles?”

“I don’t know. I don’t remember much about that time.” It was not surprising. The beginning of the apocalypse was utter chaos. It was hard for most people to recall certain events. “I think I blocked most of it out.”

“What do you remember?”

“Dad and I went on this run once, just the two of us. Things went bad. We had to hole up in the meat locker of an old butcher shop until morning.” Stiles shivered unconsciously at the memory, as if he could still feel the cold from the freezer. “It was a close call, we were both nearly killed trying to get in to the locker.”

“Scary situation.” If there were ever two people that could survive together, it would be John and Stiles. Jax was sure if the group was comprised of just them, then they would both still be alive right now.

“I was so scared that I was gonna lose him, that I crawled into his lap like a four year old. I was sobbing my eyes out, babbling about how it would kill me if I ever lost him.” His breath hitched as he continued. “He shut me down pretty quickly, made me promise to do everything humanly possible to stay alive, whether he was with me or not.”

“You did that.” He kept that promise. He was still keeping it. “You survived. After he was killed, you survived.”

“I executed the man who shot my dad.” Stiles right index finger twitched as if he were pulling the trigger once again. “And every scavenger who stood beside him.”

“Saying it was all justifiable wouldn’t mean much to you.” Stiles did not believe in eye for an eye, like the Sons did. He would kill to survive, but only then. “You bought your friends time. You gave the rest of your group a chance to run. The scavengers would have killed them all.”

“I know.”

“You gave them a chance and they took it.” Jax reached out, grasped one of his brother’s hands in his, and delicately removed the glove, a little shocked that Stiles let him. He traced a finger over the scarring across the middle of his brother’s palm. “They left you to burn.”

“I waited three days for them to come back. Three days.” Stiles closed his hand around Jax’s, squeezing it firmly. “I want to say that I understand their reasoning. Objectively I do, I guess. They believed I was dead. There was no reason to come back.”

“It’s okay to be angry with them.” It was natural to be pissed off, even with the reasoning in mind. “No one would blame you for it, even them.”

“I’m not angry.” He dropped his gaze to their linked fingers. “I haven’t been angry in a long time.”
“I would call bullshit, but I can see the difference between anger and apathy.” Stiles put on a good show, could act a certain way if it expected, but that was all it was, an act. “So what is it, Stiles? What’s going on that head of yours? What do you feel?”

“I think at least once in our lives, something happens, and we all think the exact same thing.” Jax felt himself tense in preparation for the blow before Stiles even got the words out. “‘I want to die.’”

“I can’t say that I’ve never felt that way.” He could recognize that dark place in his mind that held those thoughts.

“I’ve felt like that three times in my life. The last time, when I lost my dad, it was different.” Of course it was. Losing a parent was the worst thing that a child could go through. “I didn’t want to die. I was dead. It felt like I had died right along with him. I don’t think I ever really came back from that.”

“Stiles-“

“The times before that, the fog lifted eventually.” The numbness always wore off. “It hasn’t this time. It’s almost like I’ve been stuck in that moment, when my dad was killed, since it happened.”

“You are not dead, Stiles.” He had to know that by now. “I don’t think you want to be either. I think you want your dad back, but you know you can’t have him, so you refuse to let go of the last moment you had with him.”

“I wear the ring my mother gave him on a chain around my neck, I never take it off. I put his badge in my pocket every morning before I leave the house.” They were all he had left of his dad, so he kept them close.

“Opie and I rebuilt my dad’s bike after his accident.” It still sat on display in the clubhouse. “I know how hard it is to let go. It doesn’t happen overnight. It takes a lot of time. No one is asking you to let him go. I’m not asking for that.”

“I didn’t realize you were asking me for anything.”

“Your old group being here is bound to dredge up some things.” There was unfinished business there, feelings that had not been dealt with. “Your dad’s death and you being left behind…”

“I can remain objective.” That was kind of the problem. “I can be objective where they are concerned, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“I don’t want you to be objective.” There was honestly no way to remain entirely objective in this situation. “Despite how long it’s been since you spent time with them, you know them and how they work as a group.”

“I am not going to be your double agent.”

“I don’t want you to be.” He didn’t want Stiles anywhere near them, let alone infiltrating their ranks. “I want you to use the knowledge you have, when you decide where they should be in our community.”

“How I feel about them should not be a factor here.” That was an incredibly naïve statement. “They will be treated just like anyone else who has come through the gates.”

“The people we knew prior to the end have always been treated differently.” It wasn’t intentional, it just happened. “Look at it this way, Tara is the head of the clinic, because she is the only doctor
we have.”

“Yeah, so?”

“If a stranger came through the gates, who was a doctor with twice the experience Tara had,”
Another doctor had not come in yet, but it was always a possibility. “Would you make that doctor
the boss at the clinic, simply because he had more experience?”

“Absolutely not.” Stiles shook his head. “We cannot place strangers in positions of power. They
can’t be trusted until we get to know them. I have no intention of putting anyone from the pack in a
leadership role.”

“That is all I needed to know.” He just wanted to be sure he had no one attempting to make a power
play. “Do you know why I made you the Deputy Mayor?”

“A part of you hates me and wants me to suffer.” The younger man quipped. “It was my idea to let
people in so you want me to deal with them.”

“The latter is true, the former is not. I did it because the Stilinski roots run just as deep in this town
as the Teller’s and the Winston’s.” The Stilinski’s went back a few generations, Stiles was the first
raised predominantly out of Charming. “Your grandfather was the Chief of Police here, before
Unser. That means something to the people from here. They trust you. You’ve got a good read on
them.”

“They talk to me. I listen. That is 70% of my job.” He made deductions about the citizens of their
town based on those conversations. “The other part of my job is paperwork and dealing with Jarry.”

“We do not have a credible reason to banish her.” If they looked hard enough they might be able to
find one.

“We do not have to keep feeding her ego. She’s relatively new to Charming, but she’s already
announced herself as Sheriff.” No one had ever denied her claim as Sheriff, they just brushed it off.
“Even if we did officially reinstate Charming PD, Eglee would be Sheriff- or the Chief. She has
seniority in Charming, and she’s a hometown girl.”

“Do you want to reinstate Charming PD?” The local police department had been shut down and
replaced by San Joaquin sheriffs before the end of the world, but that didn’t mean shit anymore.

“It would be a good idea.” Stiles gave the reaper carving a considering look. “As things are now,
the majority of people here are Charming natives. They know SAMCRO’s history. It won’t be like
that forever. Strangers are not going to jump to trust a bunch of bikers with their family’s safety.”

“Showing that we have a police force separate from the club could help soothe some tension.” It
would give newcomers a chance to get to know them without thinking of them as authority figures.
“That being said, I am willing to hand over a measure of control to the department, but not full
control over this town’s security measures.”

“What if you had an inside man? Someone connected to you and to SAMCRO. He doesn’t wear a
kutte and he’s not exactly threatening. He’s a townie, but he grew up outside this place. He’s the
son of a sheriff himself and the grandson of the former police chief.” Well, only one person fit that
bill.

“You want to be a deputy?” He always thought Stiles might join the Stilinski family business.

“I want to be the Commissioner.” He wanted to scale the chain of command completely. “I have
zero experience, I know that. But I didn’t have any experience being Deputy Mayor and you had
no problem tossing me in the deep-end and watching me struggle.”

“You know, throwing me in the deep-end is actually how Gemma taught me to swim, so I don’t
appreciate the analogy.” Though, he would admit that is exactly what he had done with Stiles and
his job. “You want to add running the police force on top of your Deputy Mayor duties?”

“Eglee would have most of the responsibility as Chief. I would handle paperwork and any
problems that may arise, whether it be with the public or within the department.” More paperwork,
more politics, but it was closer to what Stiles had always dreamed of being than what he was now.
“And Commissioner sounds cooler than Deputy Mayor.”

“It does have a nicer ring to it.” Jax grinned. “Talk to the council, take a vote. Let them know it has
my support. If it passes, talk to Eglee, see if she wants the job as Chief.”

“Okay.” Stiles nodded. “Next council meeting is in two days. It gives me a little time to work out
the details. One favor?”

“Name it.”

“You handle Jarry when she tries to kill me and Eglee.” Jax really should have seen that request
coming. “You know she’s going to freak if this shit passes and she’s not the one with the big
office.”

“I will deal with Jarry.” He would protect his baby brother from the psycho cop. “If it passes, we’ll
announce it at the town barbecue on Sunday.”

“I don’t have to go to that do I?” The pained expression on Stiles face was enough to tell him how
much he did not want to attend.

“Even if it wasn’t mandatory,” The Sunday barbecue was basically an informal town meeting and
everyone had to be there. “I need both my seconds by my side. Opie is my VP, but you are my
second in command when it comes to leading this town.”

"So I have to be there?"

"You have to be there."

"Damn it."
They spent a total of five days in Charming, adding up to a work or school week. It was enough time for the pack to draw a few conclusions about the town. The walls were sturdy, high, and well guarded. There was a steady supply of food and fresh water. The people they met were nice, and had nothing but good things to say about the Sons of Anarchy.

SAMCRO was kind of the problem. The pack could not go anywhere without a member of the club trailing closely behind. It was a little unnerving to be followed every time they left the inn.

And Stiles? They hadn't seen Stiles since that first afternoon at the gate. He was either too busy to see them, which is the excuse Mason had given, or he was actively avoiding them. They hadn't even caught a glimpse of him, and every person they spoke to kept their mouths shut when it came to his whereabouts.

They had a week in Charming and the only thing they had been allowed to do was check out the town. In all fairness, it was all they were promised. No one had explicitly told them they would have access to Stiles or anything else.

Whether Scott wanted to admit it or not, the lack of contact with Stiles helped clear their heads. They could get a feel for how things worked in Charming without emotions clouding their judgment. So, when he sat the pack down to discuss making the town their permanent base, he expected everyone to be in agreement.

“I set a meeting with Jax.” He informed the group as they ate breakfast. “It’s an hour from now.”

“What’s the meeting about?”

“I’m going to tell him whether we are staying in Charming or leaving.” Alpha or not, he did not make the final call, and the indignant expression and low murmurs from pack members only exemplified that point. “Derek and I have talked about it, and if some of you would like to leave, then no one will stop you. I do want you to try, though. Try to make this work longer than one week.”

“They only gave us one week.” The elder Argent grumbled. “What makes you think they will let us leave after we tell them we want to stay?”

“I doubt they will keep us here against our will.” If they wanted to do that, they would have taken their weapons when they came in. “That is one of the things I will talk to Jax about.”

“What makes you think he’s going to tell you the truth?” To Malia’s credit, there was no accusation in her tone, only mild curiosity.

“It’s not like we can’t fight our way out if things go bad.” Cora surmised. “We have a supernatural edge that they don’t have.”
“That we know of.” Liam interjected. “Mason says this is a safe place. I’ve known him my entire life, so I believe him.”

“You haven’t seen him since Beacon Hills was evacuated.” Allison was right, a lot could change about a person in that amount of time. “He’s not the same person he was when you knew him.”

“You all haven’t seen that Stiles guy in years, but he still let you in.” Liam pointed out defensively. “I’m staying. I don’t care what you guys do. I’m giving this place a shot.”

“Scott and I are staying too.” His mom told the pack what they had decided days ago.

“Who else?” He needed to know before he met with Jax.

“Core, Peter, and I, will stay.” Derek answered for his uncle and sister, as well as himself.

“Us too.” Lydia grabbed her mother’s hand in a show of solidarity.

“We’ll stay.” Mr. Yukimura spoke up for his family.

“Deaton?”

“Of course.”

“Argent?”

“We’ll give it a try.” If Chris stayed, Allison would too.

“Parrish? Danny?”

“I’m in.” The former deputy agreed.

“Me too.” Danny raised his hand.

“Okay.” Everyone was willing to give it a shot. “I’ll let Jax know. Hopefully, we can all start to relax once we’re settled in.”

Stiles made an effort to spend at least a few hours with his nephews every week. Full days were not applicable with his work schedule. An hour or two every other day, or the odd night, was the best he could do.

Sometimes, he read them stories. Other times, he volunteered to help out with recess at the school. Often times, like this one, he would take them to the park in town and let them run off their excess energy.

“Careful, Thomas, watch your footing.” He warned the youngest as he climbed the jungle gym.

“Abel, you sure you don’t want to go and play?”

“I’m sure.” The older boy had remained at his side since he had picked them up that morning.

“You feeling okay, buddy?” He was usually a ball full of energy that could not be contained.

“Yeah.” He sighed loudly as he reached up to take Stiles hand in his. “Mommy and Daddy were talking about you last night.”
“Oh yeah?” He couldn’t fault the kid for listening in on his parents conversation, he had done it plenty of time when he was a child.

“Dad said if the new people stay, a supply run will have to go out soon.” It would be sooner than he had originally planned, yes, but still not for another few weeks. “He said you were gonna go with them.”

“That’s the plan.” He would have to wait to see whether or not Jax would follow through and let him accompany the run team.

“I don’t want you to go.”

“I’ll come back.” There was always a risk that came with being outside the walls, but nothing he could not handle.

“You were gone a long time before,” Abel dropped his gaze to the ground as he continued. “You were at the hospital when Tommy was born, and then you were gone and you didn’t come back for a long time.”

“I had school.” Summer break was over a week after Thomas had come into the world. “Then the outbreak happened.”

They did not even make it to the Homecoming dance before the infection spread. The schools shut down first, in a failed effort to keep the students from catching what they thought was a disease. First, it was the schools and then it was everything else. The military had evacuated Beacon Hills just after the hospital was overrun.

“If I could have been with you guys every second, I would have.” He tried to be with them, but Charming belonged to the dead upon his first visit. “I’m sorry it took me so long to get back. It won’t be the same this time.”

“What if it is?”

“It won’t be.”

“How do you know?” Abel stopped in his tracks, forcing Stiles to be still too.

“I didn’t know that I had anyone to come looking for.” He took his time traveling south from Port Angeles, because he believed everyone he loved was dead. “I do now. I’ve got you and your brother. I have your dad. Hell, Opie’s coming with me. Between the two of us, we make up your dad’s impulse control. Without us, he’s fucked. We’ve got to come back for his sake.”

“You’re not supposed to say words like that around me.” The boy let out a longsuffering sigh. “They’re called bad words for a reason.”

“Sorry.” He forgot sometimes. “Anyway, you don’t have to worry about me not coming back, ‘cause I’m going to come back.”

“Promise?” His nephew requested earnestly.

“You know I can’t do that.” As much as he wanted to give the boy a guarantee, he just couldn’t. “But I promise that I will do whatever it takes to come home, okay?”

“Okay.” Abel nodded. “When is the run leaving?”
“Not sure yet.” He had not taken the time to work out the details. “I’ve been distracted.”

“How can I go on the run?”

“Absolutely not.”

“How can I go when I’m older?”

“No.” Technically that was not his call, but semantics.

“Why not?” Stiles had two answers for that, neither of which Abel would like.

“Right now, you’re too young.” He was not going to let an eight year old go on a supply run.

“What about when I’m your age?”

“Ask me when you’re my age.” He might have a reason that went beyond ‘because I said so’ by then.

“Besides uncle Opie, who else is going with you?” He was beginning to become concerned about his nephews newfound interest in the run team.

“Juice.” Unless there was another problem with the electrical grid. “Maybe Tig, I think he’s up for a turn. I’ll have to check my list.”

“How come my dad doesn’t go on runs?” That really was not a question he expected Abel to ask until he was a little older. “I don’t want him to, but it doesn’t seem fair. All the other Sons go, but not him.”

“For better or worse, your dad is the leader of the Sons of Anarchy and of Charming.”

Jax becoming the President of the Sons was a role he had been molded for since birth. Being the leader of Charming was secondary, almost a side effect of his role as SAMCRO pres. The Sons turned to him for guidance, so the Charming natives did too. The strangers who came in saw that dynamic and followed by example.

“That means he has a responsibility to the people from Charming and the ones who come through the gates.” Whether Jax wanted that responsibility or not. “You’re in school. You’re learning history, about governments, kingdoms, stuff like that, right?”

“Not really.” Maybe they didn’t start teaching that until junior high. “The teacher’s not good with history. I’m learning lots of math.”

“Right.” They really needed an actual teacher at the school. “Well, the leaders, kings, queens, presidents, they make the hard calls. They decide what is best for the group. They had guards and soldiers to keep their land safe or fight in the battles.”

“Now it’s to keep the town safe and go look for supplies?”

“Exactly.” More or less, anyway. “You know, keeping this place safe is not just going on runs or guarding the wall. It’s maintaining society. It’s the day-to-day stuff. Your mom is a doctor, she makes sure everyone is healthy. The farm keeps us fed. Your dad oversees all of it. You get it? We all pull our weight.”

“What will I do when I’m old enough to have a job?”
“That sort of depends,” There were a lot of factors involved. “The world could be an entirely different place by then. What do you want to do?”

“Sometimes, I want to help people, like mom does.” A doctor, that was a noble choice. “Other times, I wanna be like dad and uncle Opie. What did you want to be when you were little?”

“I always wanted to be a cop.” He latched onto that idea as a child and never let it go. “Almost every memory I have of my dad, he’s wearing his uniform. I wanted to wear one just like it when I became a deputy.”

“Your daddy was a policeman?”

“He was a sheriff.” A damn good one too. “When he first started out, he was part of the K9 unit.”

“Where they train puppies?”

“Yes.” The Sheriff before him thought it would help him re-assimilate into society after being in the military so long. “The dog who was his partner, Sarge, she lived with us. She was the best dog a kid could have.”

“I wish we could have a puppy.” Even if they could find a dog that was not rabid, Abel and Thomas would not be allowed to have one on account of Tara being severely allergic. “Did you have any other pets?”

“I had a boa once.” He successfully hid it under his bed for a few weeks before it was discovered. “My dad was really scared of snakes, though, so it had to go live with Opie and Donna after he and my mom found it.”

“Snakes are gross.” Abel scrunched up his nose in distaste. “I kinda like Grandma’s birds, but they’re boring.”

“They kind of are, I guess.” He didn’t really mind them. “Go wrangle your brother, okay? We gotta get you both to school.”

“Okay.”

As a rule, Jax did not allow anyone who was not wearing a kutte into the chapel. Family was the only exception. Family and Scott McCall, apparently.

The alpha had shown up bright and early, ready to talk. Jax didn’t feel inclined to accommodate him, but he had been informed by multiple parties that he needed to be more diplomatic. So, he led the younger man to the reaper table and left his gun behind the bar to be nice.

“What brings you by?” Jax was even kind enough to mask the hostility in his voice. “Is your group enjoying our town?”

“Y-yeah. Yes, we are.” Scott seemed a little put off by his change in attitude, which gave him the upper hand, he supposed. “We would like to stay.”

“But you have concerns.” It would save them both a lot of time if they didn’t beat around the bush. “Everyone does.”

“The main concern is, are we going to be able to leave if we decide we no longer want to be here?”
Could they still change their minds later down the road if Charming was not all they hoped it would be?

“You are free to come and go as you like.” They did not force people to stay if they didn’t want to. “We have rules here, but we are not a prison camp.”

“What about our weapons?” Scott hadn’t been packing when he came in, nothing heavier than his wolf power, anyway. “Some of my people will want to keep theirs.”

“Like I said before, we won’t take anything you brought in with you.” Not unless they gave them up willingly or they became problematic. “If you plan to carry around town then it needs to be knives or guns, something easily concealable. They have to be kept out of sight.”

“Okay.”

“Your man with the crossbow caused quite the stir strolling through town with it these last couple days.” The clubhouse and community center had a ton of complaints about it from other citizens. “I will not tolerate it any longer.”

“Chris is just worried.” That did not excuse his behavior. “He won’t bring it out again.”

“If he does, my people are going to take it as a threat.” He was not even referring to the Sons, but to other survivors in town. “There are kids, elderly folks, and everyday people, just trying to go about their day, who do not appreciate a stranger pointing a weapon in their direction.”

“I’ll talk to him.” He would believe that when he saw the middle-aged man without the bow.

“How’s your pack with control?” Jax took a little too much pleasure in the surprise that showed on Scott’s face. “A select few of us are privy to that information. We have a jail or you can go outside the steel wall if you have an issue on the full moon.”

“Not all of us are shifters, but we are all good with control.” Again, Jax would believe that when he had proof. “If we have a problem, I’ll let you know.”

“I understand you are the Alpha of your pack. I’ll respect that.” Within reason at least. “So long as you know that your role as Alpha means nothing to the people in this town or to me. It only matters to you and your group.”

“I didn’t plan to go spreading my status around.” That was reassuring. “I’m not here to step on your toes, Jax.”

“It wouldn’t be easy for you if you tried.” He was not afraid of Scott trying to usurp him. “You and yours need to remember that you are nothing more than citizens in this town. You hold no power, no status. You don’t get special treatment because once upon a time you were friends with Stiles.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s working against me, actually.” He was right about that. “I haven’t seen him since the gate.”

“Let me be very clear about Stiles,” Jax could be lenient when it came to some things, but not this. “He is off limits.”

“Jax-“

“Unless he goes looking for you, you will keep your distance.” It was the same stipulation they had for Gemma after the shitstorm she caused when Stiles was a kid. “Your paths will only cross in a
professional capacity. He’s not your friend or your fall guy. He is nothing to you.”

“You can't do that.” He was getting real tired of people telling him that. “You can't choose who Stiles is friends with.”

“I can and I will if I think it’s in his best interest.” He was stepping over a line here, he knew that, but he didn’t care. “He’s my brother. I look out for him. I protect him.”

“He’s my brother too.”

“No.” Jax brought his hand down hard onto the wood tabletop, the loud boom of it reverberating throughout the room. “He stopped being your brother the day you and your pack left him out there to die.”

The thing about this world was, it was nearly impossible to survive on your own. You needed someone to watch your back. You were too vulnerable, too exposed, on your own. If there came a time when it was just you out there with the dead, then you were pretty much dead already.

Scott didn’t understand, because he had never been on his own. He had an entire pack to lean on. He did not know what it was like for Stiles after he had been left behind. He didn’t see the damage that had caused.

The pack was not there to witness the panic attacks Stiles suffered when he was around too many people. They did not know that Stiles slept with a knife in his grip for weeks when he first came home, and that several members of the club had scars from the wounds it had left behind when they had accidentally startled him awake. Scott was not the one who ushered Stiles back into the house when he was found walking the perimeter with a loaded gun in his hands and a lethal look in his eyes. They did not see any of it, because they wrote Stiles off as nothing more than a bad memory after the fire.

“You stay away unless he seeks you out.” Jax repeated firmly. “If you don’t, you and every single person you came in with will be outside those walls a hell of a lot faster than you came in.”

“I just want to talk to him.” Scott argued.

“And you will when he interviews you this afternoon.” Unfortunately, Jax had not been able to talk his brother into handing over that particular task. “That’s business, not pleasure. It is not time for you to catch up or beg for forgiveness. Understand?”

“Yes.”

Stiles had a file for every recent arrival loaded up on the computer, all seventeen of them. It was the biggest group that had come in so far, which meant it was going to be a long day. With any luck, it would progress as it usually did, despite the fact that he knew a majority of the group beforehand.

The interview process was fairly straightforward. He took down their general information, got a good read on their personalities, and determined where they would fit in. Once that was done, he would assign them a job and give them a wristband that corresponded with their new profession. He would then send them to the clinic for a checkup with Tara, who in turn would send them to Lyla to be housed.
This time was to be no different from the handful of other times he had done it. He was going to do his best to remain objective when facing the pack, even though Jax had instructed him to do otherwise. It was going to be tough when he had a Son looking over his shoulder than entire time.

“You know, Piney, I usually do this on my own.” He glanced over at the older man who had let himself into Stiles office moments earlier without so much as an explanation.

“I know.” The elder Winston pulled a chair into the furthest corner of the room and plopped down on to it. “I won’t interfere. I’m going to sit here quietly and make sure no one tries anything.”

“Right.” Piney would sit there and glower all day. “They won’t try anything. On the off chance that they do, I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself.”

“You’re more than capable.” That knowledge did not stop the old man from crossing his arms over his chest and glaring at the office door like it owed him money. “I’m not going anywhere, son. Might as well get this show on the road.”

“We’ll talk about this later.” The overprotective thing was sweet, but getting completely out of hand.

“You’ve got chores to do later.” Piney reminded him. “We can talk while you help me.”

“Fine.” Stiles agreed then picked up his walkie-talkie to speak to Mason. “Send in the first one, please.”

They were doing this alphabetically by last name. That meant Allison was up first. The advantage of knowing who would come through the door was that he had time to prepare, to hide any nervousness or malice from showing in his expression.

“Hi, Stiles.” The younger Argent smiled softly as she entered the room, looking as radiant and Disney princess-like as the first day he had met her. Too bad he could see right through her.

“Allison,” He wanted to tell her to drop the act, he wasn’t buying it, but he was trying to be nice, so he would let her do what she thought she needed to do. “Have a seat.”

“Thanks.” She seemed out of place as she took the proffered seat, uncomfortable in her own skin. “How does this interview work?”

“Pretty much like you would expect it to.” It was more or less a job interview. “I ask you a few things, you answer to the best of your ability, and preferably with the truth. Does that sound like something you can do?”

“Yes.”

“Then this should go rather quickly.” Barring any complications, that is. “I already know your basic information, so I don’t need any of that. Let’s get right down to where you’ll be working. We have a few different areas that need bodies. Do you have any special skills that could be valuable to a certain area?”

“I saw that you have people guarding the gate,” They had multiple guards that changed shifts throughout the day. “With my weapons training, I would be best served there.”

“No.” They had strict rules for the guards. “The wall guard is full, and you have to be in town for at least thirty-days to even be considered.”
“Oh, okay.”

“The closest thing I can get you is the C.C. team. Clean and clear.” Who knows, maybe Allison could get the prospects in line. “You clear out the walkers built up against the chainlink every morning and then burn the bodies.”

“That sounds fine.” She nodded. “When would I start?”

“Monday.” Everyone would begin at the start of the week. “That takes care of the job. Now for the question which the clinic staff will ask as well, but I would like to get it into your file today. If you are bitten by a walker, would you like us to take extreme measures to ensure your survival?”

“What does that mean?”

“Amputation.” They had only done it once so far, but it was successful. “If you need time to think about it –”

“I don’t.” She gazed down at her hands as if she were imagining one of them being gone. “Yes. Extreme measures. I’ll take those.”

“Okay.” When it came down to life or death, the will to survive usually won out. “Uh, we don’t have welcoming packets with information or anything. It’s a waste of paper. So, I’m obligated to tell you that when you require feminine hygiene products or stuff like that, uh, the clinic provides them.”

“Oh.” Yeah, that did not get any less awkward the more he had to do it. “Um, thanks, I guess.”

“Clothing and food can be found on Main Street, along with everything else.” He told her as he rooted through the desk drawer until he found a grey wristband and held it out to her. “You need to wear this at all times. If you can find a more fashionable alternative of the same color, it can be exchanged for that.”

“Why do I need this?” It was a refreshing questions, most just wrote it off as a town eccentricity.

“The color represents your job. It allows you access to the supplies you will need for it.” It would also deny her access to other areas in town. “Keep it on or you won’t get very far.”

“All right.” She accepted the band, wrapping it carefully around her wrist. “What now?”

“You can wait for the others to get done with their interviews,” Which could take hours. “Or you can head to the clinic for your examination.”

“I’ll wait for everyone else.” Staying together, that was definitely the safe play. “About Port Angeles, you know we didn’t have a choice.”

“Time to go.” Piney declared gruffly, his wrinkled hands finding the gun holstered at his hip.

“Port Angeles doesn’t interest me.” Stiles shrugged his shoulder, brushing off the subject entirely. “Water under the bridge.”

“Obviously.” Her eyes darted to the old man cautiously. “Scott feels so guilty about what happened. You need to tell him it’s not his fault.”

“This is not the time or the place for this.” He was no anywhere in the realm of ready for that conversation. “These interviews are not the only things I have to do today. I would like to get them
done sooner rather than later. So, if you don’t mind, leave, and send your father in.”

“Fine.”

He decided to switch things up a bit after Allison’s outburst. He was not going to give the pack a chance to steer the conversation in another direction. He would ask what he needed to ask, assign them the job he thought fit best, and send them on their way. He could not afford to be sidetracked.

“I’ll work the same job as Allison.” Luckily for him, Chris Argent had no patience for pleasantries either. “And I’ll accept the extreme measures if they are needed.”

“Okay.” He made a note of the information in Argent’s file before removing another grey band from the drawer and handing it off to Chris. “Deaton’s next.”

The vet’s interview went quickly. He would work at the farm, making sure the animals were in good health. He also surprised Stiles by saying ‘no’ to amputation if he were bitten.

The kid who came in after Deaton was someone Stiles did not recognize.

“Liam Dunbar?” He read the name off the list in front of him. “Mason’s friend, right?”

“Yep, that’s me.” The teenager did not sit down, instead choosing to fidget awkwardly in the middle of the room. “You’re Stiles, Scott’s friend.”

“Nice to meet you.” He would rather not confirm or deny the friends thing just yet. “I know you probably want to stick with Mason. He’s starting work at the clinic on Monday. I can put you there, if you want. If you’d like to try something different, you can work at the diner, or we always need people at the farm. What do you think?”

“The clinic with Mason, please.”

“The clinic it is.” He pulled a blue band from the drawer for the younger man. “Are you human or a shifter? I don’t know you, so I’ve got to ask.”

“Shifter.” He answered apprehensively. “I’m a werewolf.”

“Born or bitten?”

“Bitten.”

“Was the alpha that bit you a rogue or did you have a pack before you met up with Scott?” Was there a psychotic alpha out looking for his stray beta? Did this kid lose his entire pack to the walkers or hunters?

“Scott bit me, actually.” Well, that was an unexpected turn of events. “It was an accident.”

“Right.” Perhaps he needed to worry about the True Alpha’s control, along with half a dozen other things. “Normally, I would ask about taking extreme measures to save your life, in the event that a biter gets a hold of you, but I’m not sure it applies here.”

“Shifters aren’t immune to a walker bite.”

“Exactly.” And walkers that were shifted into werewolves were a whole new level of terrifying. “For a human, we would amputate a limb to prevent the infection from spreading. It really depends on where the bite is located. I’m not sure how it would work with your werewolf healing. We could try, though.”
“Yeah. If it happens, try.” It would be an experimental surgery at best.

“Okay.” He hoped it wouldn’t come to that, but he had to ask anyway. “So, I don’t want to bring up a sore subject, but is there any family that could be looking for you? A lot of families were separated during the evacuation. We’ve been compiling a list for when we get in contact with others towns, we can share info, reunite people with their loved ones.”

“There’s no one.” Liam fixed his line of sight out the window as he continued. “The military killed them when my stepdad refused to go with them. He was a doctor.”

“I’m sorry.” He had seen things like that happen. A select few members of the military went off the rails a bit, killed fellow soldiers who went against them or civilians who pushed back. “Well, from here you will go to the clinic for a checkup. Just tell Dr. Knowles that you’re a shifter and she’ll give you a clean bill of health.”

“Does everyone here know about the supernatural?”

“No.” It was hard enough convincing the club when he had proof, he did not want to go through the task of telling the whole town. “Only a few of us. Try to keep your abilities on the DL, if you can. If you have trouble during the moon, let me know, and I’ll set something up for you.”

“Cool. Thanks.”

“That’s about it. You can head out now. Send in Cora Hale, please.”

Cora’s interview went as swiftly as Chris and Deaton’s. She gave him a ‘yay’ for amputation and accepted a job on the build team. To her credit, she didn’t mention anything about the pack or their time at the cliff house. She did smile at him though, which was all kinds of creepy. It was a very nice smile, don’t get him wrong, but he had never seen her smile before so it was a little off putting.

“What did she do?” Derek’s voice pulled him from his stupor as the older man came through the door.

“Smiled.” It threw him off, which was probably the point. “How are you, Derek?”

“I’m fine.” The wolf sat in the chair across from him, seeming as relaxed as Stiles had ever seen him. It was odd, to say the least. “You?”

“Same.” Everything was fine except for the Hales being weird. “You’ve gotten the gist of how this goes from the others in the pack?”

“Yeah. I want to stick close to Cora.” Given how long Derek and Cora spent apart after the Hale house fire, it made sense that Derek was not ready to be separated from her. “You put her on a build team.”

“Build team it is.” One brown wristband for Derek coming up. “You gonna let us amputate if the undead get bite happy?”

“Sure.”

“Zombie-wolf’s after you.” He received the barest hint of a grin from the beta for the nickname. “Anything I should know?”

“He’s actually been pretty…mellow.” That was an interesting word choice in reference to Peter.
“The apocalypse suits him.”

“Huh.” In a world where you had to kill to survive, Peter was thriving. Shocker. “Anything I should know about the others?”

“Is there a reason you’re asking me and not them?”

“Forget it.” He and Derek had always been honest with each other, most of the time anyway. He was hoping that would come in handy now. “Send in your uncle on your way out.”

“Liam is Scott’s first beta. Malia is a born werecoyote, who spent the majority of her life stuck in a full shift. Kira’s a born kitsune, but only came into her power two years ago.” It looked like Derek was willing to be forthcoming after all. “Oh, and your theory about Lydia being a banshee was correct.”

“Duh.” When it came to the supernatural, he hadn’t been wrong yet. “Thanks you for telling me all of that. Do you have any questions for me?”

“Is this town what it says it is?” He was waiting for someone to just come out and voice that suspicion they all had sitting in the back of their minds. It was almost fitting that it was Derek.

“Yes.” Charming was the safest place he had been since before the dead began to rise.

“Okay.” Derek nodded as he stood and made his way to the door, only to stop short. “Stiles?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m glad you’re not dead.” He said it almost begrudgingly as if the words were being forced from his throat, but they were genuine.

“Me too, for you.” Stiles might not be comfortable with the pack living in his backyard, but he didn’t want any of them dead.

“Former flame?” Piney questioned once Derek had exited the room.

“What? No.” He had a healthy attraction for the wolf, but that was purely physical. “To the best of my knowledge, he’s only ever dated psychos.”

“So you’re his type.”

“Oh, haha.” He flipped the old man the bird as one Hale replaced another. “Creeper.”

“Stiles,” Peter smiled serenely as he settled into the chair and stretched his legs out, kicking Stiles feet under the desk. “So happy to see you didn’t burn to a crisp. I know what a bitch that can be.”

“If anyone can, it’s you.” He was not ignorant to the fact that Peter, more than anyone else, could understand what he went through inside that house.

“What job do you have picked for me?” The wolf clasped his hands together over his stomach dramatically. He was obviously expecting something glamorous and extravagant.

“Oh, you’re going to be my new assistant.” He took a special kind of pleasure in bursting Peter’s bubble. “You’ll replace Mason when he starts his new job.”

“You can’t be serious.” Oh, but he was deadly serious. “Why?”
“Well, you see, I don’t trust you.” He could not set Peter loose on the unsuspecting people of Charming if he couldn’t be trusted. “So, it’s better if I put you somewhere I can keep an eye on you.”

“That’s just rude.” The older Hale seemed mildly offended as he climbed to his feet. “I have been nothing but helpful. You must remember that, it hasn’t been that long since you were part of the pack.”

“You are helpful all right.” He snorted. “A helpful pain in the ass.”

“But you agree that I’m helpful.” Stiles could not hold back the eye roll no matter how hard he tried.

“Sure. You need to wear this.” He removed an orange band from the drawer and tossed it to the wolf. “Do you agree that I can chop off your head if you get bitten by a walker? Amputate, I mean. Amputate your head.”

“Of course.” Peter wasted no time clipping on his new accessory, cringing at the bright color. “You’re the only one I’d let do it.”

“I’m not sure what a walker bite would do to you, since you’ve already come back from the dead once.” Peter might be the only one who could reject the infection and remain himself. “Hey, how about we let one take a chunk out of your arm and see what happens?”

“Hmm…” The wolf titled his head to the side as if he were considering it. “Perhaps another time.”

“Killjoy.”

Walking the wall was a tedious task. It was a lot of back and forth, making sure there were no holes in the chainlink or dents in the steel. It was helpful in managing the walker build up, seeing if the biters had gathered another point in the fence.

The rest of it was checking the surrounding area outside the walls for anything that out of the ordinary. Leaves rustling a certain way, unlike the disturbance a walker made. A glint of light bouncing off the scope of a gun. Tire tracks in the dirt. You had to be on the lookout for any kind of sign that someone else had been there.

The search had always turned up a whole lot of nothing, until today that is. Today there was a car where there shouldn’t be. A late model dark green Mazda parked a few clicks away between two trees. With the amount of dirt caked over the paint job, and the branches and leaves placed strategically on top of it, he might think it had been there for some time, but he knew for a fact that it had not.

“Jax,” Kozik spoke into the walkie-talkie. “Need you out at the south wall, just behind the old Texaco station.”

“Copy that. Be right there.”

After Peter, it was Isaac’s turn. Stiles and the beta had never really taken to each other. They both
felt threatened by the others place in Scott’s life. Apparently, that contempt had not faltered with Stiles ‘death’ if the wolf’s attitude toward him meant anything. He barely stepped through the door, said ‘farm, no extreme measures’ and accepted the green wrist band before disappearing.

Danny’s interview followed Isaac. He had joined up with Scott’s pack a few months prior, according to his intake form. He made a point of telling Stiles he was still human, which was nice. He was more than delighted to take Stiles up on his offer to work at the communications tower, eager to get his hands on some technology again.

Unfortunately for Stiles, Lydia Martin was scheduled to come in after Mahealani, thanks to the beauty of the alphabet. The redhead sauntered in as if she were putting on a show, sat down all prim and proper, folding her hands delicately over her lap. The tense set of her shoulders was the only indicator of her anxiety.

“Lydia,” He greeted her politely, because his father had raised him to be a gentleman. “I’ve got you down for the clinic. I thought you would work in the lab or be trained to become a doctor or nurse. Is that all right or would you prefer something else?”

“The clinic will do.” It was the best job he could think of that would put her brain to good use.

“Would you like our doctors to make every possible effort to keep you alive if you are bitten by a walker?”

“Yes.” So far, that was eight yays and two nays. “Did you agree to that as well when you came through the gates?”

“Yep.” He did not survive a house fire and his time on the road to let a walker take him out.

“Since I’ll be working at the clinic, does that mean I get a pretty blue bracelet like Liam?”

“You do.” He found a pale blue in the drawer and handed it over to the banshee. “Can you send in your mother on your way out, please?”

“We’re not done.” Her Miss Priss act started to slip as Stiles attempted to move on to the next interview. “Stiles, we’ve been in town a week and you haven’t spoken to us once.”

“We just spoke.” He had spoken to a handful of pack members already. “This is not a social call, Lydia. This is my job.”

“Not much of a job.” He really did not appreciate the snide tone. “I’m sure you can take a few minutes out of your busy day to chat.”

“Not today.” He still had seven interviews left and then chores to do. “My schedule is full.”

“Stiles-“

“Now is not the time, darlin.” Piney grumbled. “You’ve got your job placement, now it’s time to move on.”

“And you are?” Lydia cast an irritated glare to the man in the corner. “His bodyguard?”

“That’s my uncle Piney.” He would be damned if he let anyone show Piney disrespect, even if he was being grumpy. “And he’s right. It is not the time. There’s a barbecue Sunday, mandatory for all Charming residents. I’ll be there. Maybe I can find some time to talk then.”
“Fine.” She straightened out her clothing as she stood. “For what it’s worth, it’s nice to see you.”

“It’s nice to see you too.”

Being called out to the south part of the fence in the middle of the afternoon was never a good thing. Jax and Opie had driven out together to meet Kozik. The Son was waiting on top of the wall, his gun at the ready. Jax and his VP climbed up the ladder cautiously to join him.

“What’s going on?” He asked the guard, wondering what the hell could be so important to warrant their presence.

“Take a look.” Kozik jerked a thumb toward a patch of land outside the chainlink. “You see what I see?”

“Yep.” There was a car parked a few miles away, pretty well camouflaged but noticeable to the trained eye. “You know how long it’s been there?”

“I just got on shift about an hour ago. This is my first walk around.” They had two guards on the wall at all times, one to stayed put at the gate, while the other walked the full length of it. “It would be easy to miss, but I know it wasn’t there yesterday.”

“You think we had a breech?” Opie raised their main concern.

“We can’t be sure.” The thought of it put him on edge, more so than he already was. “I want guards out this way, as well as at the gate. Both sides watched at all times. At least until we’re sure.”

“Should we go door-to-door? Headcount?” It would be a good idea if they had the manpower to do it.

“Too many doors.” They would have to check all the houses and buildings, including the empty ones. “Keep your eyes peeled for someone you don’t recognize when you’re around town.”

“This was bound to happen sooner or later. We’ve been lucky up until now.” Opie muttered as his eyes scanned the horizon. “Luck always runs out.”

“Yeah, it does.” There’s just might have. “Kozik, just to be safe, I want everyone on top of the wall wearing bullet proof vests and those SWAT helmets we picked up.”

“Sounds more like paranoia then safety.” The Son muttered under his breath but nodded along. “I’ll put the word out.”

“Make sure they all keep their mouths shut too.” They did not need a town full of panicked people. “We’ll hold an emergency meeting for everyone who needs to know.”

“All right.”

“Be extra cautious up here, man.” Jax urged, not wanting anyone to get hurt.

“Will do, brother.”

“Check in once an hour.”

“Yep.”
His meeting with Natalie Martin was simple. She was a former teacher and willing to return to that profession. All and all he spent about three minutes with the woman.

Melissa was by far the easiest interview. She did not bring up Port Angeles or his dad. She tried to make him feel comfortable by taking the pressure off and allowing him to control the conversation. She took the blue clinic band and authorized him to use extreme measures if need be. She returned the waiting room without any cajoling, offering him a fond smile as she went. He wanted Melissa to stay, if only to put off the inevitability of meeting with Scott.

Out of everyone in the pack, his connection to Scott was the strongest. They had been like brothers since they were kids. They were virtually strangers now, but that did not stop the Alpha from stumbling in like an overexcited puppy that was trying to contain his excitement. There was weariness in Scott’s eyes, though, as if he was unsure how he would be received.

“Scott,” Cool, calm, and detached, that was how Stiles forced himself to be in the company of his old friends, more so with the Alpha than the others. “How you been?”

“Still reeling, I think.” He chuckled nervously. “I never thought I would…”

“See me again.” He finished Scott’s thought for him. “You thought I was dead. I’m not. Let’s move on.”

“How long have you been here?” So, that was a ‘no’ on the moving on.

“About a year and a half.” It was the longest consecutive amount of time he had spent anywhere since he left Beacon Hills.

“Where were you before? I mean, after Por-“

“On the road.” There were a few short stops along the way, but he never stayed in the same place any longer than he had too. “Detoured back to Beacon Hills for a hot second. Saw Mr. Harris, he’s totally a cannibal now.”

“Makes sense.” Yeah, he doubted Harris being a crazy person who ate people would come as a shock to anyone. “We stopped back home too. It’s where we lost Boyd.”

“Oh.” He noticed the absence of the other man at the gate and his name from the intake form, but he thought it was best not to bring it up.

“Yeah.” Scott bit his lip as if he wanted to say more, tell Stiles how it happened, but didn’t.

“Anyway,” Stiles shook the thoughts of deceased friends from his head as he tried to direct the conversation back to where it should be. “I was going to put you at the farm with Deaton and Isaac. I figure your experience at the vet’s office could be helpful. Okay?”

“That sounds good.” He took the green band Stiles removed from the drawer.

“You heard about the extreme measures?”

“Yes.” He had to have, given how many people had come in and out of the office all morning. ”Have the doctors do whatever it takes.”

“Okay.” Stiles noted that in the file just as the walkie-talkie on the desk cackled to life.
“All black-bands need to be at the clubhouse ASAP.” Opie’s voice boomed through the radio.

“That’s us.” Piney got to his feet in record time for a man his age. “Mason will have to handle the rest or whoever’s left will have to reschedule.”

“Mason can handle it.” Stiles assured him then turned to Scott. “Gotta go. Sorry.”

“It’s okay. I’ll see you later?”

“Young. Sure.”

They had to be careful when it came to handing out sensitive information. Telling the wrong person could be the first step in inciting a riot. So, Jax kept the meeting quiet, Sons and family only. They gathered in the clubhouse, as usual. Gemma and Tara were already waiting when he and Opie showed up and more Sons followed in their wake, while Piney and Stiles were the last to arrive.

“Lock it up.” Jax ordered the prospects. “Doors, windows, everything.”

“Radio’s switched off too.” Opie added.

“What’s going on, boys?” Gemma asked as they battened down the hatches.

“Someone may have come over the south walls.” He tried to break the news as gently as possible. “There’s a Mazda parked about two miles out. It’s pretty well hidden, but Kozik is convinced it wasn’t there yesterday.”

“We can’t be sure if we had a breech or if it’s a warning.” For all they knew, it could have been parked their purposefully. “Either way, we’ve been compromised.”

“We need everyone in security on alert.” Stiles spoke up, clearly formulating a plan. “Extra guards along the walls. Perimeter sweeps around the chainlink.”

“My thoughts exactly.” Jax was glad they were on the same page. “Four guards on the wall at all times. Teams of two doing perimeter sweeps.”

“I’ll take the night shift for the perimeter sweep.” His youngest brother volunteered. “Switch out every six hours, like the wall guards.”

“That’s a good idea. I’ll take the shift with you tonight.” Jax was wound too tight to get a good night’s rest, he might as well do something useful. “Juice, I want you and Sergio switching off twelve hour shifts in the communications tower. I do not want those radios being unattended for even a minute. If there’s any chatter from the CB or whatever, I want someone to be there to hear it.”

“You got it.”

“I want everyone armed.” He sent his wife a hard look, letting her know that included her. “Piney, I want you at the school house while it’s in session. If someone wanted to hurt us, the kids are easy targets.”

“I’ll keep them safe.” Piney grandkids went to that school along with Abel and Thomas.
“Bobby, you get a schedule made up for the wall and a perimeter shifts. Coordinate with Kozik.” He handed out assignments to everyone the best he could. “Stiles, brief Eglee before you go on duty tonight. Just tell her to keep her eyes open for someone suspicious.”

“I will.” Keeping the police force informed was part of his job as Commissioner.

“Everyone is on call 24hrs a day until we know what is going on.”

“Should we scope out the Mazda?” Tig questioned. “Check for something its owner might’ve left behind?”

“We can’t be sure its owner doesn’t have eyes on it.” They could not risk spooking whoever parked the car. “Let’s keep our eyes on it. See what we see.”

“See what we see.” His brothers echoed.
The Sky Wasn't Big Enough For Them All

Chapter Notes

Unbeta'd.
Chapter title comes from Dirty Paws by Of Monsters and Men

Working a six-hour shift at the wall on top of his other duties was exhausting, even if it had only been two days. He didn’t have a lot of time to do much other than sleep when he was not walking the perimeter or taking his usual meetings at the community center. Work, sleep, rinse, and repeat. It was tiring, repetitive, and a little lonely.

As it was, every person pulling double duty were nothing more than ships passing each other in the the night or day. There was no time to share meals or have a conversation with someone. The lack of contact, both physical and emotional, was taking its toll.

Stiles had been sleeping his five-hours alone, because he and Juice’s schedule never coincided. So in the early morning hours, when he felt the bed shift under a new weight he was immediately drawn to it. He curled around the body, marveling in the warmth of it. He wrapped his arms around the bare waist of the man who had joined him.

“Your hands are freezing.” Juice shivered even as he settled into Stiles embrace. “Put ‘em under the covers for a few minutes. Jesus.”

“But you’re so warm.” He nuzzled the back of the older man’s neck.

“You’re always cold.” Juice shuddered while he took Stiles hands in his and rubbed them between his own, using friction to heat them.

“Did you come home early or have I slept late?” Their shifts never overlapped. When one of them was at work, the other was catching up on well-deserved rest.

“Sergio and Precious got into it this morning, so he came in early and took over.” He explained through a yawn. "Let me take off."

“Glad he did.” He placed a butterfly kiss on Juice’s shoulder. “Haven’t had a chance to just lay here together.”

“Lay here, yeah.” The Son mumbled as he dragged Stiles had down, beneath the waistband of his briefs, to his half-hard cock. “We can lay here and do nothing. Or…”

“Or.” Stiles tightened his fingers around Juice’s dick, causing him to thrust his hips. “I can jerk you off.”

“Mmm.” The other man moaned as Stiles stroked his cock. “I like that idea.”

“Or.” Stiles climbed to his knees, turning Juice onto his back so he could straddle his legs. “I could blow you.”

“You could ride me.” Juice countered. “Or fuck me.”
“Oh.” His ground his hips down against Juice’s thighs, more than onboard for that plan. “You sure you don’t want to ride me?”

“I just got off a twelve hours shift. I don’t have the energy to ride anything.” Juice ran his blunt nails over Stiles chest, tweaking his nipples as he went. “If you want me, you’ve got to do the work, man.”

“I spent the last two nights walking in circles for six hours.” At least Juice got to remain stationary in a chair for his shifts. “My legs are killing me.”

“You spent almost two years doing nothing but walk.” Juice reminded him of his time on the road. “Six hours shouldn’t even get your heart rate up.”

“I’m out of shape.” He spent over a year in captivity, a good lot of that time behind a desk. His muscles were not what they used to be. “My heart rate goes up at the smallest things now. Like when I look at you for a little too long.”

“Flattery is not getting me off my back.”

“That’s not really a turn off.”

“You like me on my back?”

“I like you anyway I can get you.” Stiles licked his lips invitingly. “You know, I-“

“Stiles,” Jax’s voice cackled over the walkie-talkie. “Need you down at the community center.”

“I’ll kill him.” Stiles growled as he began to climb off Juice’s body, only to be stopped by firm hands gripping his hips.

“Take a breath.” Juice said in placating tone. “I don’t think he does it on purpose.”

“It’s still bullshit.” Every single time they tried to have an intimate moment they were interrupted by someone, usually Jax, who needed something that could not wait.

“I know.” Juice nodded as he reached for the radio on the bedside table. “Remember that everyone is under a lot of stress. We’re all irritable and sleep deprived. No use making a difficult time worse by being a douche.”

“I like you better when you’re on my side.” He did not appreciate being called a douche.

“I am on your side. I’m on everyone’s side. I don’t play monkey in the middle, remember?” That was their deal when they started seeing each other. He would never put Juice in the middle when it came to he and Jax or the club. “I’m only trying to stop a potential, pointless, fight before it starts. I thought you and Jax were over your bullshit anyway.”

“We are.” They had stowed their shit, mainly because of the packs arrival, but they had been good the last few days. “Like you said, we’re all irritable, getting on each other’s nerves.”

“Keep that in mind before you speak to him.” Juice instructed as he handed over the walkie-talkie. “By the way, I hate being the reasonable one out of the two of us.”

“Yeah, that’s my trait, not yours.” He lied and clicked the button on the radio. “What do you want, Jackson?”

“I need you to come down to the community center.” Yeah, he had said as much already.
“Why?” Seriously, he had two hours, two, until he was scheduled to be there for work.

“I need your help with something.”

“Do you and Tara get interrupted by Gemma or Opie as often as you interrupt Juice and I?” That would be at least once a day.


“You’re punishing me for not having children?” That was some major bullshit right there. “The beauty of liking dick is that two men are in no danger of procreating.”

“I don’t know about that.” Jax chuckled. “The military gave the men at evacuation centers a bunch of different shots, claiming they were to help fight off the infection from a walker bite. Tara did some tests on the ones left behind and the majority weren’t antibiotic after all.”

“The government lying about something? I’m shocked.” Alert the press!

“Some help with fertility, and one might’ve been an experimental drug that she thinks was designed for men to grow a womb.” It was a very interesting, very fictional, story his brother was spinning. “The government scientists wanted to increase the chances of repopulating the earth by broadening the demographic of those who could conceive.”

“One, you are so full of shit.” That was by far the biggest load of crap he had ever heard. “Two, you sound like you are reading from some conspiracy theory website.”

“I read it straight from Tara’s file.” Bullshit. Tara did not allow anyone outside the clinic to read her files.

“You’re a liar.” He told his brother before giving Juice a dubious look. “He has to be lying.”

“I think you are incredibly sleep deprived if you're believing any of that.” Well, Juice was not wrong about that. “If one of us was going to get knocked up, it would have happened already. And that is more like the plot to a bad Sci-Fi movie than it is a real life scenario.”

“Werewolves are real.” If the supernatural was real, then why not something out of the box like male pregnancy? “There are zombies walking around.”

“He’s screwing with you.” Juice nudged him off his body so he could sit up. “Like a typical older brother.”

“He’s an asshole.” Stiles grumbled before addressing his brother once again. “What do you need me for at the community center?”

“Just get here.”

The town barbecue had always been a good way to interact with Charming citizens. It was informal, unlike an official city hall meeting where everyone was voicing complaints about one thing or another. The barbecue at the park in the town square was a nice change of pace. It made them see more approachable and put everyone at ease.

The shindig usually went off without a hitch. The townspeople, including the Sons, were pretty excited for the chance to wind down. If it weren’t for the mysterious car parked outside the south
The threat had everyone on high alert. There was not a restful moments for anyone in the club or working security. They were all overworked, bogged down, and feeling as if danger was just on the horizon. The barbecue only added to their stress.

Normally, it was all hands on deck in preparation for the event. Everyone pitched in somewhere. With the club and several high-ranking civilians pulling double duty, they were short on staff. That was going to pose a problem later in the day.

“How do you want to do this?” Opie asked, blinking tiredly as they sat down at the picnic bench outside the community center.

“I have no fucking clue.” Jax scrubbed a hand down his face, wishing he had brought his hat to block out the morning sun. “Let’s wait for the one of us who breathes paranoia to get here before we decide anything.”

“He’s not paranoid, he’s-“

“Hyper vigilant, I know.” He did not really see the difference. He figured it was something Stiles said when he got offended by being called paranoid.

“I can’t believe you called him in.” Opie shook his head disapprovingly. “Juice bribed Sergio to come in early with a sealed bottle of vodka. He wanted a few hours to be with Stiles.”

“I’ll try to carve out a block of time for them to slip away later.” He understood the need for alone time with a sexual partner.

“So, I guess you and Stiles finally had that talk.” The other man speculated. “He finally spill his guts while you two were doing the perimeter sweep?”

“Spill his guts about what?” The kid had been abnormally quiet during the sweep.

“He and Juice.”

“What about them?” He was well aware of his baby brother’s fuck-buddy status with the Son. “I know they’re screwing.”

”That’s a no then.” Opie rolled his eyes and proceeded to change the subject. “How’s Tara doing? Haven’t seen her around much.”

“Busy at the clinic.” She was about to get busier with new members starting work the next day. Of course, that was not what was keeping her up at night. “There’s this sick little girl…”

“The one she wants all the hospital equipment for?”

“Yeah.” He still did not have a plan ready to get that done. “I think she feels helpless. There’s not much she can do for the girl until she knows what’s wrong with her.”

“That’s gotta be driving her crazy, as a doctor and a mother.” Crazy was putting it mildly. “When things calm down, we should work on cleaning out the hospital and that new building she wants to move the clinic to.”

“If they calm down.” In a world where the dead walked among them, it was hard to say if it would ever be truly calm. “I’ve been thinking about what Kozik said at the wall. Maybe we are
overreacting about all of this.”

“Someone put that car out there. It’s better to be overly cautious than willfully ignorant.” Opie reasoned. “They might be waiting for us to let our guard down before they launch an attack.”

“Very possible.” Whoever it was would be greatly disappointed when they realized Charming would not pull back the extra security. “Let’s not give them the opening they want.”

“There had better be a damn good reason for pulling my ass out of bed early.” Stiles grunted as he plopped down on the opposite side of the bench. “And coffee. I will leave right now if-”

“We brought your drug of choice.” Jax pushed the travel mug over. “God knows you would go into withdrawals without it.”

“Why am I here?” Stiles questioned before taking a large sip of the brew.

“We’re going to be short on people for the barbecue.” He explained, gesturing toward the area being set up in the town square. “Everyone is busy doing shifts at the wall, but the meeting is mandatory. People are going to notice if some of us are missing.”

“That is a problem.” The younger man agreed. “Sounds like something SAMCRO’s pres and VP have to sort out.”

“Really?” Opie titled his head to the side. “I’m pretty sure it falls under the Commissioners jurisdiction.”

“Ah crap.” Stiles sighed dramatically. “Damn it, Ope. I expect this from him, not from you.”

“Sorry, bro.” The big man did not sound very sorry. “But you wanted the job, now you’ve gotta do it.”

“Fine.” Stiles ceded. “What about mini-shifts? Switch people out every fifteen or thirty minutes, so that everyone can make an appearance.”

“Sounds good.” Jax praised.

“Duh.” The kid eyed them with barely concealed contempt. “Between the two of you, you at least have half a brain. You could have come up with that all on your own. There was no reason to call me.”

“Maybe we missed you.” He and Opie studiously ignored the insult, as mature brothers did.

“I saw you last night, Jackson. What are you guys up to?” There was no lack of accusation in Stiles voice.

“We just wanted a little brotherly time.” Opie admitted nonchalantly.

“You’re lying.” God, the kid was a suspicious little shithead. “Speak or I go back to bed and stay there all day. No work. No barbecue. No nothing. And Juice will be staying with me.”

“Look, we know everyone is tired.” It was an understatement to say the least. “The list of shit we need to do just keeps getting longer. We don’t want to put too much crap on too many people. We want to spread as much of the extra work between the three of us and off the rest of the club.”

“Understandable.” It was better for the three of them to be suffering from exhaustion, rather than having the entire club get sloppy because they are too tired to do their jobs properly. “What do you
“Help with the set up today.” There wasn’t much to do, most of it had been put together over the last couple of days. “And I would appreciate some advice on the clinic situation.”

“A good way to integrate our new arrivals is to have them assist in other areas besides their jobs. Werewolf strength would come in handy when removing the CT and MRI machines from St. Thomas.” The kid made a good point. “Take a few of the humans to clear out the other floors of the hospital, find anything else Tara needs. I’m sure other people in town would help clean out the new clinic.”

“That leaves the club free to do extra security at the wall.” Opie noted. “But we can’t send the pack in to the hospital, where there are valuable supplies, without supervision.”

“I’ll supervise them.” Stiles volunteered hesitantly. “If a Son is with them, they’d feel the need to show off their skills. They’ll either want to impress you or show you how badass they think they are. They won’t do that with me.”

“I guess that means you don’t want a Son to back you up.” Jax did not like that at all. “You think you can handle it then I will let you do it your way.”

“How generous.” Stiles muttered.

“I’m trying here, okay?” He kept a tight leash on his brother and the kid was done with it, but Jax was still having a hard time when it came to loosening the reigns. “No need to be a dick about it.”

“Sorry.” Stiles flashed him a small, but apologetic, smile. “As confident as I am that I can run on four to five hours of sleep, it’s not going to work if I’m clearing the hospital, doing my work at the community center, and doing a nightly perimeter sweep. There are not enough hours in the day.”

“Don’t worry about the perimeter or the wall.” They should have pulled Stiles off that as soon as Bobby and Kozik had the schedule made up. “Keep your focus on the community center and the hospital.”

“Will do.” He sagged his shoulders, relieved to erase one duty from his daily routine. “You’ll keep me in the loop about that Mazda or a breech?”

“Yeah.” They kept that information from the public, not from each other. “Let’s go get the kids game tables set up. On their last trip out, the run team found a bunch of stuff the little ones will really enjoy.”

“Okay. Hey, can I bail after announcements?” Stiles asked with a twinkle of hope in his eyes.

“Piney said you promised your buddies a face-to-face at the barbecue.” Which was probably the reason his little brother wanted to take off early. “If you wanted to avoid a confrontation you shouldn’t have said anything.”

“I said I might find the time to talk to them.” Stiles corrected. “I never gave them a definitive answer.”

“I’m not sure how I feel about your flip-flopping where your old friends are concerned.” One minute the kid wanted to work with them, the next he didn’t want to be anywhere near them.

“I’m not flip-flopping.” He furrowed his brows. “A professional relationship and a personal one are two different things.”
“Do they know that?”
“I don’t know.”

Melissa had gotten used to being the adult of her son’s pack. She was the den mother to a handful of children who thought they were all grown up, most of who no longer had parents to turn to. It meant listening to their woes and stitching up their wounds. She did whatever she could to make their live a little less stressful in this chaotic world. The problem was, they had a habit of not listening, and it was not only the kids she had to deal with.

“Chris,” She had lost all patience with the man during their short time in Charming. “The crossbow stays here.”

“I’ll keep it unloaded. The arrows will be in my bag.” He told her as he placed the ammunition in his makeshift quiver. “It’ll be at my side, not pointed at anyone.”

“There is no reason to take it.” They were allowed to carry knives and guns, so long as they kept them out of sight. The crossbow was an unnecessary show of force. “Leave it.”

“No.”

“You are actively trying to cause problems for us here.”

Even after Scott had come back with a message from Jax about Argent carrying the bow, the hunter still went out with it. Four different Sons and a few civilians had stopped them in the street to politely ask him to put it away. It was safe to say the people of Charming were becoming increasingly annoyed by Argent’s refusal to stow his weapon of choice at home.

“We all agreed we would try here.” Melissa had seen them struggle, but try all the same. “You are the only one who is not making an effort.”

“I don’t trust these people.” He had made that abundantly clear. “They’re keeping things from us.”

“They have every right to keep things to themselves.” No one had agreed to share secrets. It would be stupid to show all their cards for anyone who came through the gates. “You do not have to intentionally antagonize them by carrying your bow when they specifically asked you not to.”

“I will do whatever it takes to ensure my daughter is safe.” He glared at her with a ferociousness that said he thought she was the one putting his child in danger. “I don’t care if I make a few people uncomfortable.”

“We are not the ones in charge here.” They had no say in how things were done or how much information they were given. “We’re still new here. This is not a time to push against the rules to see if they’ll push back.”

“I’ll do whatever I feel is necessary.”

“You will put everyone at risk.” They came in as a group, what one of them did reflected on all of them.

“I’m keeping us alive.”
The gazebo at the east side of the park was set up as a staging area. It would serve like a podium for the opening announcements and then live music. It was where Jax, Opie, and Stiles were currently standing as they watched the town square fill with people. The Sons currently in attendance were scattered around the park trying to keep an eye on everyone.

“Headcount says that’s everyone.” Chibs' Scottish drawl filtered through the walkie-talkie.

“Juice, you got that mic up yet?” Jax asked the other man who had been working on getting the sound system running.

“Yep. Here you go.” He handed over the microphone. “I gotta get back to the tower. I’ll be back in fifteen for my ‘hey, look, nothing’s wrong’ shift.”

“You mean you’ll come back for lunch or something.” Stiles said with a smirk.

“Or something.” Juice gave him a quick peck on the lips before seeming to remember they were not alone. “Meet you at-“

“Yeah. Yep.” Stiles nodded enthusiastically.

“Goodbye, Juice.” Opie ushered the Son off. “You can plan your rendezvous in private.”

“See ya later.” The other man shot them a wave before disappearing into the crowd.

“Let’s get this started.” Jax let out a long breath before gazing curiously at his little brother. “You wearing a vest, kid? I can tell you right now Jarry’s packing heat and she’s definitely going to lose her shit after we make the announcement about the police department. I can’t promise she won’t take a shot at you.”

“I’m good.” Stiles pulled up his shirt to reveal the bulletproof vest. “As long as she doesn’t aim for my head.”

“You know how to duck.” He quipped before turning to address the crowd. “How’s everyone doing this afternoon?”

They were all in good spirits, if their hooting and hollering was enough of an indicator. Their energy was almost intoxicating.

“There are a couple of things we need to discuss before we dig into the food.” Although from the looks of things, some had already started filling their plates. “You make have noticed some new faces around town. Make sure to give them all a warm welcome.”

Welcoming was not exactly how he would describe the citizens of Charming’s reception of the pack. However, that could be due to the fact that the pack had made a less than stellar impression since they arrived.

“We’re moving the clinic into a bigger building, so the staff will be able to accommodate more patients. If any of you would like to help with the clean up and move, the volunteer sheet is up on the pin board at the community center.” There were always a few people willing to get their hands dirty. “I’d like to bring up Deputy Eglee for this next announcement.”

The crowd’s reaction to Eglee was telling. They parted to allow her through to join them at the gazebo, a sign of respect. They never would have done that for Jarry, which was just another sign
that they had made the right choice.

“The council, with full backing from myself and SAMCRO, have decided to reinstate Charming PD.” Jax took Unser’s old badge from his pocket as he spoke. “It was voted that Candy Eglee, a veteran deputy here in Charming, will hereby be known as Charming Police Chief Eglee.”

As the people began to cheer, Jax removed the old deputy’s badge and pinned the new one to her uniform. The council elected Chief smiled brightly as she shook his hand, accepting her new position.

“It was another council decision that elected Stiles Stilinski as the Police Commissioner.” To Jax’s surprise, Stiles had actually put that to a council vote, rather than just taking the job for himself. “Any decisions made within the department will fall to the Chief and Commissioner, whether it be jobs or public safety within the walls. If you have any questions regarding those things, please speak to them.”

“If you have any concerns about Eglee or Stiles’ new positions, I suggest you take it up with the council, who elected them.” Opie added, sending a pointed look to Jarry, who was practically fuming in her seat, but keeping her mouth shut nonetheless. “Stiles, do you have anything to say?”

“Yes, I do. I thought everyone would be happy to know that we have two certified teachers joining our school.” Those in town that had children should be very pleased about that. “And a registered nurse will be starting at the clinic tomorrow.”

“Things are looking up, folks.” Jax pasted on a grin. “With that in mind, let’s eat, drink, and have a good time.”

Scott and the pack clapped along with the rest of the crowd. The townspeople were all hyped up, pumped from the information their leader had given them. It wasn’t a lot, but it was enough to put smiles on everyone’s faces.

“Jax knows how to work a crowd.” The alpha murmured.

“‘Things are looking up.’” Allison scoffed. “Laying it on a little thick, isn’t he?”

“Give it a rest.” His mother snapped at the huntress. “I’m done listening to you and your father complain.”

“Mom.“ He understood her irritation, neither Chris nor Allison had been shy about their wariness of Charming, but there was no reason for to be rude.

“I’m going to speak with Dr. Knowles.” She gestured to Jax’s wife who was chatting idly with a few others at the food table. “Get to know her a bit before work tomorrow. I suggest you all do the same.”

She was off without another word, stalking away angrily, as if every one of them had personally offended her. He wanted to go after her, but he knew whatever he had to say would fall on deaf ears. His mom did not lose her temper often, but when she did, it was best to leave her alone.

“She’s right.” Pissed off or not, his mother had a good point. “We should get to know the people we’ll be working with”
“That’s kind of a problem.” Isaac scratched his head. “We know where we’re working, but not who we are working with.”

“Except me and Liam.” Lydia put in. “We’re at the clinic with Melissa and Dr. Knowles. The rest of you are just going to have to ask Stiles.”

“Easier said than done.” Chris muttered as his eyes scanned the surrounding area for the other man.

“Oh, for the love of,” Peter huffed, sniffed loudly to catch Stiles scent before whipping his head to the left. “Stiles! Minute of your time! Work related!”

“Work related?” Derek quirked an unimpressed brow at his uncle while Stiles made his way over.

“Didn’t I tell you? Stiles and I will be working together.” Peter chuckled as he swung an arm over Stiles shoulders. “Isn’t that right?”

“You’re my secretary.” The human declared solemnly, like he was already regretting that decision. “Don’t get so excited. What do you guys need? Besides another talk about what weapons are permitted to be on your person while you are in town. I thought you would have gotten the memo by now, Chris.”

“He has. He will not bring it again.” Scott cut in before Argent could respond. “Can you tell us some of the people we’ll be working with? We’d like to meet them before tomorrow.”

“Oswald runs the farm. Rat Boy handles the CC team. Opie leads the build team. Mary deals with the school stuff.” Stiles pointed each of them out in the mess of people in the park. “And you already met the people at the clinic.”

“What about the communications tower?” Danny asked.

“That’d be Juice. He’s not here right now.” Stiles admitted. “I’m sure you’ve seen him around town. He’s wears a kutte and sports a mohawk.”

“Scalp tattoos. I’ve seen him.” Danny grinned suggestively. “He’s easy on the eyes. What’s his deal?”

“Deal?” Stiles furrowed his brows in confusion.

“Girls? Guys?”

“Uh, both.” The human answered skeptically.

“So he bats for my team?” Danny practically vibrated with excitement.

“Occasionally.”

“In that case,” The hacker sidled into Stiles space, as if he was about to share an intimate secret. “Think you can put in a good word for me?”

“You know, I would, but I can’t.” Stiles patted the other man’s shoulder consolingly. “Maybe the better question would have been, is he single.”

“Is he?”

“Have you seen him?” Stiles asked incredulously.
“Stiles,” A male voice sounded from Stiles walkie-talkie. "You there?"

“Speak of the devil.” The human unclipped the radio from his belt and brought it up to his mouth to reply. “I’m here. Is there a problem, Mr. Ortiz?”

“A big one. Or, at least I like to think so.” Juice teased. “Wanna come help me out?”

“I suppose I could be pulled away. See you in a few minutes.” Stiles made a ‘what can you do’ motion with his hands as he started to back away. “So, first of all, Chris you need to take your crossbow back to your house. That is your last warning. Secondly, I, um, I have a thing. So, I’m gonna go. Bye.”

“I think that answers your question, Danny.” Lydia retorted as Stiles jog off. “I can take an educated guess on what that big problem is.”

“Pretty sure we all can.” Malia wagged her brows.

“Let’s do what we said we would.” Scott suggested, trying to wipe the mental image of Stiles in a compromising position from his mind. “Get to know the people we’ll be working with.”

“What am I going to do?” It was an honest question coming from Danny, considering his boss was otherwise occupied.

“Get some food. Make some friends.” The barbecue was a good opportunity to meet new people. “And, Chris, please take the crossbow back home.”

“This place isn’t home.”

“It could be.” Home was pretty much wherever they were all together at this point. “They have asked you nicely to put it away, multiple times.”

“I’m just waiting to see what happens when they stop being nice.” Argent glanced over at the group of Sons gathered near the refreshment table. “That is when we will know what kind of people they really are.”

“You want them to attack you to prove that we should leave.” Cora shook her head. “Why don’t you just go if you don’t want to stay?”

“I’m trying to keep everyone safe.” The older man glared at the pack members. “Something is going on and I’m going to find out what it is.”

Jax enjoyed making the rounds at the barbecue. He liked knowing the people in town were comfortable and having a good time. Most of them were happy to chat with him for a few minutes and kept the conversation lighthearted and drama free. He normally kept one of his kids at his side as insurance. No one was going to start shit with him if a child was in hearing distance.

Abel had grown tired of being used as a mode of defense, so after making the announcements Jax had snatched Thomas from Tara. He lifted the boy onto his hip, told him to smile, and let his cuteness factor do all the work. Thomas could suffer through pinched cheeks and cooing if it meant keeping things civil.

“He is just the cutest thing.” An older woman who worked at the General Store beamed at the boy.
“He gets it from his mother.” His youngest son was the spitting image of Tara. “How are things at the store, Irene?”

“Oh, it’s just fabulous.” He didn’t read too much into that, **fabulous** was to her what **fine** was to Stiles. “I thought we could expand.”

“Expand?”

“Well we have all that yarn and things from the old crafts store.” Those items were easily accessible seeing as the General Store was located right across the street from the crafts store. “I thought instead of just mending clothing, we could make some as well. Sweaters and socks, things like that.”

“That’s a great idea.” They could use some warm clothing with winter setting in. “Gemma and Mary could help you out with that. They both knit.”

“I’ll talk to them.”

“Jax!” A shrill voice followed by heavy footfalls shouted across the park.

“Will you excuse me?” Jax offered Irene a regretful frown as he turn toward the female stomping toward him. “Althea.”

“What in the hell was that?” Jarry, unlike the other citizens in Charming, had no qualms about yelling with a child around. “Reinstating Charming PD with Eglee as the Sheriff? I have seniority over her.”

“Eglee has been in Charming her entire life. She joined the department straight out of high school. She has seniority in this town.” There were more people in Charming that were **from** Charming than there were outsiders. “People trust her. She doesn’t frighten everyone she meets.”

“And your brother as the PC? He is nowhere near qualified for that.”

“None of us are qualified for anything.” That included her. “We all do the best we can with what we have.”

“Stiles is not that best we have.” Jarry probably thought she was.

“The council thinks that he is.”

“A council that he is a part of.” He really did not like what she was implying.

“We both know that is not how the council works.” If there was a vote that involved someone on the council, that person would recues themselves from the proceedings and let the others handle it.

“He knows everyone there. They like him. He had an unfair advantage.”

“How well the community receives you is a big part of why people are put in certain positions.” He could not, in good conscience, place someone the citizens of Charming could not stand in a position of power. “You have given them no reason to like or trust you. You are never going to be chief or even a deputy if you cannot get along with anyone.”

“I am a depu- I am **Sheriff**.”

“No, you are not.” She was just another citizen at this point. “Chief Eglee and Commissioner Stilinski will be conducting interviews and deciding who will join them at the police department.”
“You have got to be kidding me.” If she was not pissed before, she sure as hell was now.

“I’m not.” He could almost guarantee that Jarry would not be wearing a badge when those interviews were through. “If you have a problem with how things are being done, you can bring it up at the next town hall meeting.”

“Jax,” Tig strolled to his side. “Got a minute?”

“Yes.” He turned his back on Jarry to lead Tig away. “What’s going on?”

“Got a nutcase at the gate.”

“Inside or outside?” If it was outside then the simple solution would be to leave them there.

“Inside.” Oh, that was great. “You might want to grab Stiles before you head out there.”

“He’s already fucked off.” He had seen his brother making his way out of the park a few minutes ago. “I don’t even know where he went.”

“The gym.” Tig jerked a thumb in the direction of the old building. “It’s a good place to fuck if you can’t wait till you get home.”

“Jesus Christ.” He did not need to know that. “Why do I need Stiles?”

“It’s one of his people making a fuss.”

“Just tell me what’s going on.”

“Kozik vs. a crossbow.”

“Ah fuck.”

Lumpy’s Gym was the halfway point between the community center and the communications tower. It was empty, save for the dust covered boxing ring and some old equipment. It was one of the few buildings where the windows were still intact, not boarded up or broken. The only place you could find any real privacy was in the locker rooms, which was exactly where Stiles found Juice.

The other man was leaning against a wall in the showers. His walkie-talkie and kutte had been discarded onto a bench by a row of lockers. Stiles set his own radio down beside them before eyeing the Son with lust.

“Mr. Ortiz?” Juice snorted in lieu of a greeting.

“I was trying to be sexy.” He failed at that task, obviously.

“It was a little weird.”

“You’re a little weird.” Stiles sauntered over to join him in the showers. “Big problem, huh?”

“Yep.” Juice put his hands on Stiles hips to reel him in. “A hard problem. And I think you are the only one who can help me with it.”
“Oh yeah?” He brushed his lips against the older man’s. “How’s that?”

“You had a few ideas this morning.” Juice bared his neck to allow him to pepper kisses up and down his throat.

“I did have a few things on my mind.” He rucked his Juice’s tee to skate his fingers over his firm abs. “They all involved you being very naked.”

“That was in the comforts of our bedroom, not in the debilitated gym that anyone can walk into. Compromise?” The Son stripped out of his shirt, letting it drop to their feet. “Your turn.”

“Nu-uh.” He shook his head as his eyes roamed the naked chest of the man in front of him. “I’m good the way I am.”

“That’s not fair.” Juice argued as Stiles rubbed against his body. “You can see me, but I can’t see you.”

“You don’t need to see me. Not anymore than you already can.” He nipped at Juice’s bottom lip, drawing the tiniest grunt of pain from him.

“And why is that?”

“Because anyone could just walk in.” As Juice had previously stated. “We don’t want to be caught with our pants down. Well, not both of us, anyway.”

Stiles sunk to his knees on the tiled floor. He extended his hands to caress Juice’s denim covered legs until they found his belt. His fingers worked nimbly, undoing the buckle, then the button of his jeans before pulling down the zipper. He licked his lips as he reached into Juice’s briefs to remove his hard cock.

“Fuck.” Juice dipped his fingers into Stiles hair as the younger man ran his tongue over the length of his shaft.

“I haven’t even gotten started yet.”

He encircled the head of Juice’s cock with his lips, sucking it into his mouth. He swirlled his tongue around it, hollowed his cheeks, and took the shaft deeper into his mouth. He moaned as he looked up Juice through his lashes, seeing the pleasure written all over his face.

“Fuck.” Juice repeated, shoving his jeans and briefs further down his hips.

Stiles took immediate advantage of the new access to previously hidden skin. He brought one hand up to cradle the older man’s balls and curled the fingers of his other hand around Juice’s cock, jacking him off as he sucked him down. Juice groaned loudly, tugging on his hair unconsciously, his hips twitching with the need to thrust deep into his throat.

“Mmph.” He pulled off with a wet pop causing Juice to whine in protest. “Let me suck you a little longer. When I tap your leg you can fuck my mouth. Okay?”

“Yeah.” Juice tugged on his hair, with a purpose this time, only to drop the hold a second later, when the screech of hinges followed by a door swinging open startled them. “What the hell?”

“Who the fuck is that?” Stiles climbed to his feet in record time, eyes darting around the room to catch a glimpse of the intruder.
“Anybody here?” Jax’s voice echoed into the locker room.

“How the hell do they know?” They had to have some kind of LoJack on him because this was getting ridiculous. “Put yourself away, dude, come on.”

“I’m trying.” Juice hastily pulled his jeans up, wincing when he caught himself on his zipper just as Jax and Opie rounded the corner. “Son of a bitch.”

“Stiles. Juice.” Jax greeted them both. “What’re you doing in here?”

“Examining the mold growing on the linoleum.” Stiles deadpanned while wiping his mouth on the back of his hand, as if Juice’s bare-chested appearance wasn’t enough of an indicator of what they had been in the middle of. “What does it look like we’re doing?”

“I don’t know.” Opie shrugged, leveling Juice with a sharp look. “What have you been doing with our little brother?”

“There is obviously some kind of brotherly thing that needs attention. Um,” Juice picked his shirt off the floor and retrieved his kutte and radio from the bench. “I’m gonna go.”

“No! Juice-“ The Son booked it out of there before Stiles could stop him. “Damn it.”

“Guess you weren’t doing much.” Opie observed in Juice’s wake.

“Not now that you’re here.” He couldn’t really fault Juice for making a swift exit. He would have done the same thing if he thought his brothers would let him. “That is the second time you have cock-blocked me today. What do you want?”

“We wouldn’t break up your love fest without a good reason.” Jax assured him, course Jax was a liar, so Stiles was not inclined to believe him.

“This better be good.” He would very much like to get back to his aforementioned love fest.

“We got a pack problem.” Opie disclosed.

“Of course we do.” Why else would they interrupt him? “They seemed fine at the barbecue. What did they do?”

“It’s just one of them.” Thank God for small favors. “Making noise at the wall.”

“Which one?” He could list off the shit-starters of that group, but he figured it was quicker just to ask.

“Argent.” That eliminated a percentage of the pack, but not all of them.

“Which one?” They would need to be a bit more specific than that.

“Chris.”

“What exactly is he doing?” Ten to one it had something to do with his goddamn bow.

“He’s got an arrow aimed at Kozik’s chest.” Ah the Argents, all brawn no brains.

“Why?” There had to be a reason, right?

“He is demanding that we give him answers.” 
“About what?” The fucking pack had not been in Charming long enough to be demanding a damn thing.

“About why we have not warned the town of the impending danger.” Jax’s aggravation over the situation was showing in the tense set of his shoulders. “He wants to know why we did not say anything about the car parked by the south gate.”

“You know what that means, right?” Opie questioned.

“It means that he either put the car there himself or saw it somehow.” Both of those scenarios meant Chris had gone over the walls or out the gates without a guard seeing him. “Or we have a leak. Someone has been talking when they shouldn’t have been.”

“We need to find out which one of those things is true.” Jax shoved his hands in his pockets. “Look, we can handle this ourselves. We just wanted to let you know what’s going on, ‘cause you used to be friends with them.”

“No. I let them in. It’s on my head if we’re being played.” He was sure if Argent was behind it that he was probably working alone or keeping it in his family. It didn’t matter. Stiles vouched for them. If something went wrong, it was his fault.

“Stiles-“

“Have Eglee go pick him up. Put him under arrest.” Chris was using a deadly weapon to intimidate another member of the community. That was more than enough to put him in a cell. “Have her interrogate him, see if she can find out how he knows what he knows.”

“You sure that is how you want to play this?” Stiles really hated his motives being questioned, especially when it was his brothers doing the questioning.

“We didn’t bring back Charming PD for nothing.” It would be a huge contradiction to handle it in house. “Send one of the deputies to find Allison. Tell her that her father’s been arrested for threatening a guard. Tell her he is being detained until further notice.”

“Okay.” Jax nodded. “And if he doesn’t talk?”

“Let’s hope he does.”

“I think it’s time we go check out that car.” Opie proposed. “See if whoever left it behind left anything that could tell us who they are.”

“I agree.”
Jax and Opie found their way to the Mazda before sunup on Monday morning. The heavy fall of rain helped shield them from any prying eyes in the surrounding area. They kept their knives at their sides and their guns loaded and holstered in case all hell broke loose.

“CC Team is going to have an easy day.” Opie grunted as he pulled his knife free from a walker’s skull. “Does it seem like the biters are piling up in bigger numbers lately?”

“More people compacted into one place.” The town might as well be ringing the dinner bell. “Charming is safe and dangerous that way. You need people to survive, but the more people you have the more likely you are to be tracked by a scavenger or walker.”

“Damned if you do, damned if you don’t.”

“Pretty much.”

“You still think we did the right thing?” Opie questioned suddenly. “Letting people in instead of keeping it just family?”

“I don’t know.” That answer tended to fluctuate depending on what day of the week it was and whom he had to deal with. “Too late to change our minds now.”

“And Stiles?” Jax’s steps faltered at his VP’s critical tone. “Do you think he made the right choice letting those people in?”

“No.”

“Are you speaking as his brother or this town’s leader?” He was not about to dignify that with a response, even for Opie. “We’ve been lucky so far with the people we’ve brought in. If the pack proves to be a threat, that is going to fall back on him. Everyone knows he let them in.”

“Every time we let someone through the gates it’s a no-win situation.” It was just another damned if you do or don’t situation. “The town would have raised hell if we had just turned them away without even a consideration.”

“True.”

“If it turns out that Argent is behind this car, and no one else, then the council, with Eglee’s advisement, will decide his punishment.” The only real options were a couple weeks in a holding cell or exile. “If it’s the whole group, we will have a much bigger problem.”

“What would be worse, a leak in our ranks or a traitor in our walls?”

“Worst outcome would be some stranger who’s been on the road too long.” You could never be
sure what kind of person you were going to encounter. “It’s better the devil we know.”

“Remember when SAMCRO used to be the devil Charming knew?” The big man quipped with a dark chuckle. “Simpler times.”

“Simpler times.” Jax echoed as they came to a stop in front of the Mazda. “How do you wanna play this?”

“The safer the better.”

The car looked empty through its dirt-covered windows, but they were not going to take any chances. They took their time, checking for any abnormalities on the outside of it. They had to be sure there were no trip wires or anything rigged to explode. After the underbelly and doors were deemed clear, Jax checked under the hood while Opie took the rear-end.

“Got a couple bullet holes here,” Opie declared cautiously before popping the trunk.

“Engine looks fine.” Jax acknowledged as he tinkered around a bit. “Hold that thought. Looks like the radiators busted. It’s got a nice long crack.”

“Uh, Jax?” The other man’s voice wavered slightly. “Come here for a second.”

“What is it?” He closed the hood before making his way around the car to take a peek inside the trunk. “Holy shit. Is that-”

“Yep.”

“Who the hell would leave that in the boot of a car?”

“There’s a note.”

“Does it explain why they parked outside the wall?” That was the answer they needed, the one they had come out to search for.

“No.” Opie shoved the note into Jax’s hands. “But it says why that is in the trunk.”

“If you haven’t seen me, I didn’t make it back. Please take care of him. He is one of the right things in a world full of everything wrong.” Jax read from the piece of paper. “Well, shit.”

“What do you want to do?” He really hated when Opie deferred to him to make decisions. “His mom or dad could still be out there.”

“They’ve been gone a while. His bottles empty.” Jax picked up the item and unscrewed the cap to take a whiff. “Has been for a day or so if the smell of old formula is anything to go by.”

“Look at how his face is all bunched up like he’s crying, but there’s no sound coming out.” It was probably an unconscious paternal gesture on Opie’s part that had him reaching down to gather the infant in his arms. “It’s like his mouths too dry, throats too sore.”

“We gotta take him in.” They could not leave a baby out there by itself. “We’ll leave a note of our own, in case his parents come back.”

“On the upside, I don’t think that Argent guy is behind this.”

“I guess that’s one charge we can erase from his record.” That did not make the guy entirely innocent though. “Let’s uh, let’s get this kid inside. Have Tara check him out. The longer he’s out
here, the higher chances are he’ll catch a cold.”

“We should send a small team out.” Opie suggested. “Search for any sign of his parents.”

“We will.” With any luck they would still be out there trying to get back to the baby they had left behind. “They shouldn’t search long. There’s a storm coming.”

Much like he did with the boys, Stiles made a point to spend time with his grandpa Nate. They had breakfast at the diner together on Mondays and Thursdays. It was the only time he dared venture into the establishment without Jax or Juice to back him up, mainly because he knew Gem would not start anything with her father present.

“What are you feeling like this morning, Grandpa?” He asked as they settled into an empty booth. “Eggs? Oatmeal?”

“Eggs are the only things on the menu this morning.” Gemma informed them as she came to stand by the table. “You want some coffee, Daddy?”

“Okay.” The old man nodded, glancing up at Gemma in confusion, as if he had no idea who she was. “Where’s Rose?”

“She’s at home, Grandpa.” Stiles lied, letting Gemma off the hook, giving her a chance to retreat to the kitchen to avoid telling her father that his wife was dead.

“Looking after the boys, of course.” Nate grinned brightly. “She swore she’d never let Nathaniel or your Johnny back into the house after they broke her crystal vase roughhousing, but she just can’t tell them no when they look up at her with those puppy dog eyes.”

“My Johnny…” Stiles mumbled to himself. “What’s my name, Grandpa?”

“You’re Henry.” The who else would you be was otherwise implied. Nate seeing him as Henry had been a recent development. It was a reference to Stiles paternal grandfather, who had died long before he was born.

“I’m Nate, Grandpa.” Telling the old man his name was Stiles only confused him more. Nate and Rose had only ever called him by his given name. “Nathaniel Thomas, Johnny’s son, Henry’s grandson.”

“Oh, Nathaniel,” A light bulb seemed to click in his grandfather’s mind, or so he thought. “He’s so angry he can’t play baseball with Johnny this year. The doctors don’t think it’s safe, with his heart condition.”

“He’s got to look out for his health.” Sometimes it was easier to play along with the elderly man’s delusions rather than correct him. “He’ll be back on the baseball diamond soon. They just have to get his medications sorted out.”

“I’m sure you’re right, Henry.”

“You know why he calls you that, don’t you?” Gemma inquired, setting their drinks and food on the table.

“Not really.” Aside from the fact that he and Henry were related, there was no link between the two
of them.

“Your daddy got his looks from his mama, but you look just like his daddy, your grandpa Henry.” That was new information. Most of his life he had been told he looked just like her, not anyone from the Stilinski side of his family. “Daddy and Henry were friends. He see’s you, he thinks he’s back in the 70s or 80s, possibly the 60s.”

“Oh.” That was both sweet and incredibly sad. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be. Simpler times. Happier times.” For Gemma, that was a time when her little brother was still alive and her father was still healthy. “It’s better he thinks he’s there instead of here.”

“I guess.”

“You should talk to Piney later.” The matriarch recommended. “He and your granddaddy were close, grew up together. He might have some pictures you’d like to see or stories to tell.”

“I’ll talk to him.” One of his biggest regrets was never asking his father more about their family history. Now he would have to settle for secondhand information. “Thanks.”

“Eat that.” She nodded to the plate of eggs. “Jax said you’re starting clean up at the hospital today. You’ll need your energy. I packed you some sandwiches for later. You can take them with you to St. Thomas. There’s enough to share with your crew.”

“You packed me a lunch?” That was not weird or out of character at all. “You know, this whole suburban mom act freaks me out.”

“I know.” She smirked. “That’s why I do it.”

“You are made of pure evil.” He hissed.

“Aren’t you sweet.” She gushed sarcastically. “Finish your breakfast. You have to be at work soon.”

“Yes, Mama Gemma.”

The pack had been stuck between a rock and a hard place since a deputy had informed them that Chris had been arrested. It was hard not to take sides in the matter, especially when you could not see the point of view of all those involved. It came down to loyalty or logic. Did they stand by Chris, simply because he was one of their own? Or did they side with Charming because they could have shot Argent but chose not to? It would be an easier decision to make if they knew why Chris had done what he did.

“Is Allison at the station with her dad?” His mother questioned as they gathered in the living room of one of the houses they had been given.

“She’s been there all night.” Scott had no idea if Chief Eglee was allowing Allison to see her father, but he knew the huntress would not leave the station until her father did.

“Good.” Cora and the others all relaxed knowing she would not be present. “We can have a rational discussion about this without any bullshit. She’s too close to it.”

“We’re all too close to it.” It was Chris, he had been with them from the beginning of it all. They
were allies, family even.

“Don’t speak for us, Scott.” Peter piped up.

“Argent went off on his own to threaten a guard. He has been disruptive and obstinate. He has flat out refused to do the few things the leaders of this town have asked of us.” Parrish stated calmly.

“Those are the facts.”

“Jax told you they would take Chris even carrying the crossbow as a threat. The guard could have fired on him the minute he aimed it at anyone.” Mr. Yukimura reminded them. “They took him into custody. They are questioning him. That’s fair.”

“I just don’t understand why he would do this.”

“It’s just been us against everybody else for so long. Trusting someone else, particularly with our safety, is an adjustment, especially for someone like Argent.” Deaton commented thoughtfully. “He’s not used to giving up control.”

“Giving up what little control we have left to strangers is not something any of us really want to do.” Lydia spoke up. “It’s going to take some of us longer than most to adjust.”

“Do you think Jax or the club will understand if we explained that to them?” Kira questioned hopefully.

“I do.” Jax and the Sons had been reasonable so far.

“It’s not going to mean much if Chris continues to act out like a child.” His mother countered. “You’ll have to convince Chris and Allison to give this place a real shot.”

“I’ll talk to them.” The burden of being the Alpha meant the hard things fell to him. “I’ll do that tonight after work. Speaking of, Bobby called over the radio this morning and said some of us have been temporarily reassigned.”

“To where?”

“They wanted anyone with supernatural strength to help move equipment out of the old hospital.” Bobby had mentioned that they would be working with Stiles, which felt more daunting than it would have a few days ago. “The rest of you can begin work at whatever job you were given during your interview.”

Tara was always the first one at the clinic. She went in an hour before everyone else so she could get the necessary paperwork done in peace and quiet. So Jax wasn’t surprised to find her there when he and Opie made it back into town.

“Hey, babe.” Jax greeted as they came through the door.

“Hey,” She waved a hand in the air but did not look up from what she was doing. “What’d you find at the car?”

“Actually, that’s why we’re here.” He tapped his finger against the receptions desk. “We found a baby.”

“You what?” Her gaze shot up from a chart to find the bundle cradled in Opie’s arms. “It was out
there all alone? In this weather?"

“He was in the trunk of the Mazda.” He was mostly shielded from the elements. “The bullet holes in it were air pockets, I think, so he wouldn’t suffocate.”

“Give him here.” She dropped her pen and made grabby hands at the infant until Opie relinquished him to her. “Hi, sweetheart.”

“You’ve got baby formula here, right?” The clinic usually kept an emergency supply of baby essentials in case it was needed. “I’m not sure when he last ate.”

“It’s in the cupboard down there.” She shifted the baby in her arms to point out the cabinet. “Make him a bottle, Jackson.”

“All right.”

“Where are his parents?” Tara questioned as she laid the boy down on the examination table.

“We think they went search for supplies or something. Didn’t want to risk taking the kid with them.” Apparently, the safer option was too leave the infant on its own. “They left a note. We’ve got a team out looking for them. Had to bring the baby back without them.”

“It’s a good thing you did.” She acknowledged, unwrapping the baby from the blankets he was swaddled in. “He’s hungry, probably dehydrated, and definitely needs a diaper change.”

“One diaper coming up with the bottle.” Jax snatched a cloth one from the pile.

“They were so close to town, why didn’t they just come in?” Opie wondered aloud.

“They were probably being cautious.” Tara mused. “Keeping an eye on things. Seeing what kind of people we are. They did not want to take a risk with their baby.”

“Cause the better option was to leave him in the trunk of a car to starve to death.” It was a shitty situation no matter how you spun it.

“For all that family knew, this town’s full of cannibals that would eat their baby or bash his head in with a rock.” His wife commented harshly. “Starvation is not what I would call humane, but considering the alternatives….”

“What are we going to do with him if we can’t find his parents?” Jax could always count on Opie to ask the important questions. “We don’t have a social worker to place him in a foster home or an orphanage.”

“What about you and Lyla?” Tara proposed.

“We got three kids already.” Kenny, Ellie, and Piper were almost more than the Winston’s could handle. “What about the two of you?”

“We barely have enough time for Abel and Thomas.” They could not give the infant the care of attention it needed, even for a short time. “How about Gemma? She’s good with kids.”

“No.” Tara shot down that idea quickly. “She’s already got enough on her plate with the diner, the inn, and taking care of Nate.”

“I guess we can ask around.”
“Oh! I have the perfect idea.” Tara clapped her hands in delight, startling the baby. “Jax, you are going to love this.”

“If I’m going to love it, who’s going to hate it?”

“Doesn’t matter. They’ll get over it.”

Stiles prided himself on being a semi-patient person. He tried not to snap at people who showed up a few minutes late to a meeting. The longer he was kept waiting, however, the thinner his patience became. It was bad enough that it was cold and wet outside, he did not want to waste time waiting on people. There were still things that had to be discussed before they even went inside.

“It’s about time.” He murmured under his breath as the pack came walking across the parking lot. “Not to be an asshole or anything, but you were supposed to be here half an hour ago.”

“Sorry.” Scott apologized. “We stopped by the police department to check in with Chris and Allison, and then we walked the others to their jobs.”

“You should have done that on your own time.” They should have planned ahead, left earlier so they could do what they wanted to do and still be at work on time. “We’ve got a lot to do and a limited time to do it in with the storm coming.”

“What exactly are we doing?” Derek asked.

“I need a couple of you to haul the MRI and CT scanners out and into that trailer.” He nodded toward the big rig parked several feet away. “Derek, Cora, Peter, Scott, you think the four of you can handle it? They’re heavy machines.”

“We can handle it.” Cora said confidently.

“Here are tarps to keep them from getting wet.” He handed them to Peter. “The rest of you, Malia, Liam, and Kira, are with me. We’re going to be looking for meds and other useful supplies that haven’t been cleared out yet.”

“Okay.”

“This place doesn’t look safe.” Malia observed the cracking walls on the outside of the building.

“Tara said someone set off a bomb on the top floors shortly before the evacuation.” It had to have been a small charge or the entire building would have gone down. “The lower levels are more or less stable. We should be okay unless the wind picks up.”

“Anything else we should know?”

“Notice the door?” He banged on the thick steel that was obviously not original to the building. “You’ll find about two dozen of these around the hospital all together. They were installed when we started cleaning up the town.”

“Why?”

“To keep whatever may still be in there from getting out.” Whatever being walkers. “When you go through one of these steel doors, you close and latch it behind you.”
“There are still biters in there?” The note of distrust in Scott’s voice was totally unwarranted. “You said this town was safe.”

“It is.” They had not had a breach yet, from the hospital or the walls. “We cleared as much as we could, but chances are there are a number of them still in there.”

“What if one of them got out and started terrorizing the town?” It was an honest question, but the alpha was an idiot for assuming they had not thought of that already.

“Every person in this town, save for the children, are armed and well equipped to deal walkers. No one is an amateur.” The kids were at minimal risk for an attack seeing as they were never left unattended. “Also, there are two guard posts on the adjacent building that are manned twenty-four hours a day. If a walker slipped out, we would know it and it would be dead before it crossed the parking lot.”

“Oh, um, I…” Scott stumbled over his words.

“Any other questions? Complaints?” Stiles offered the pack members in attendance a chance to say their piece. “Safety concerns? ‘Cause no one is forcing you to be here. You know where the gate is if you’re not comfortable enough with soft beds, hot water, and electricity.”

“No, Stiles, that’s not—“ Scott let out a frustrated noise as he struggled with what to say. “I was just…worried.”

“Right.” Having walkers in a boarded up hospital in the middle of town was still safer than being on the road surrounded by them. “Can we get this done? I would like to be home before the storm really sets in.”

“Yeah. Let’s do this.” Derek stepped forward as if awaiting a command.

“If you come across a walker you use your knife.” Stiles removed one of his from its sheath on his belt. “No gunfire.”

“What if we get backed into a corner?”

“No gunfire.” He repeated forcefully.

He turned his back on them to work the padlock on the door. He glanced over his shoulder to make sure the group had their knives, or in Kira’s case a sword, and flashlights out. It was only when he was confident that they were prepared that he slid the door open.

Being greeted by nothing but darkness was not all that shocking. The power had been cut off to the hospital long ago and the backup generator only lasted a day before it crapped out. He motioned for the others to follow as he took a few steps in. He swept the torch back and forth across the pathway, keeping an eye out for anything out of the ordinary, as they walked to the main floor lobby.

The room had been stripped of everything that made it welcoming. The chairs, light bulbs, and medical pamphlets had been taken away and repurposed long ago. There was nothing left but dust and debris.

“Imaging is two floors down. That is where you’ll find the MRI and CT machines.” Stiles told the four that would be in charge of that before handing them a slip of paper that Tara had given him. “That’s a map of how you get them out, where the service entrances are and all that.”
“Where’s the stairwell to get down there?” Peter questioned as he waved his flashlight around the room.

“Right over there.” He jerked a thumb toward the door on the left. “Cora, you have the walkie-talkie. If you have any problems, call me on it and we will be down as soon as we can. If you can’t talk, click the button twice so I know you’re in trouble.”

“Got it.”

“Good. Go.” He ushered them away and addressed the team that would remain with him. “The first three floors were cleared after the walls went up around town. We are going to start on the fourth floor and work our way up. I want to get at least two or three floors done today.”

“You really think it’s going to take that long to do a floor?” Malia asked, obviously not believing the task could be that time consuming.

“It will if we’re doing it right.” They could not afford to cut corners. “We go slow, take our time, and search every nook and cranny. Do not leave a single stone unturned.”

“Are we just looking for medicine and bandages?” Kira inquired.

“Anything useful that will fit in your bags.” They were each wearing backpacks so they could keep their hands free. “I have garbage bags in case we run out of room in our packs.”

“You’re different than I thought you would be.” The kitsune acknowledged as they headed for the stairwell. “In a good way.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” How exactly did they think he would be?

“The others in the pack, the ones who knew you before,” Liam started only to hesitate at the finish. “Uh…”

“They made you out to be more of a sidekick.” Malia divulged what the pack really thought of him, and what the young beta was afraid to say. “Scott’s sarcastic human friend who was always looking for trouble and usually found it whether it was there or not.”

“I would ask who said those things, but I can make an educated guess.” There were a select few in the pack that did not think highly of him and weren’t too shy to share their thoughts. “No offense, but you have not known me long enough to make any determinations about my personality.”

“Well, it’s pretty clear that you are no one’s sidekick.” The coyote said approvingly. “The people here respect you. You and your brothers are like the big kahuna’s in town. You’re a leader.”

“Oh.” He was unsure how to respond to that. “Thanks, I guess.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Let’s keep the chatter to a minimum from here on out.” Stiles suggested, not wanting to attract any biters with unnecessary talking. “Keep quiet. Be alert. Stay with the group. Do not go off on
He gave out orders in hopes that this portion of the pack would follow them. If one or more of them stepped out of line, it put them all at risk. While Stiles knew he could make it in and out of the hospital on his own, no matter how many walkers he came across, he did not know if the others could.

Stiles took a deep breath as he slowly turned the knob on the stairwell door. He pushed it open inch by inch, flashing his light into the corridor. He listened carefully, trying to hear the moans and groans of the undead over the sound of rain and wind from outside. Despite taking precautions, he did not notice the threat until he had crossed over the threshold.

He had only taken half a step forward when the door smacked back into him. A hand that was more bone than skin reached around, trying to grab a fistful of Stiles’ flesh. He kicked the door in retaliation, slamming the walker into the wall behind it. He was quick on the draw, pulling the door back just far enough to stick his blade into the walker’s skull.

With a newly unrestricted view, he shined his flashlight up the stairs, happy to find them void of any biters. He waved the others in, waiting for them to fall in line before continuing up the steps. Together, they made it up to the fourth floor without incident.

He unlatched and slid open the steel door far enough to catch a view of what awaited for them, cursing when he caught sight of the biters spread down the hall. There were only a handful of them visible, but there was no telling how many were hidden away in the offices and examination rooms.

“There are a couple walkers that I can see.” He informed the group. “Kira, you and I are going out first. Okay?”

“Yes.” The kitsune agreed.

“Liam, Malia, I want you both right behind us to pick up any stragglers that get by.” Though Stiles had no intention of allowing any biters to pass him. “Ready?”

“Wait.” Kira wrapped a hand around his bicep to stop him from pulling the door open the rest of the way open. “You should let me go out first. Stay a few feet back. I can take out more than one at a time with my sword.”

“All right.” He admired how sure she was of herself and her abilities. “Be careful.”

“I will.”

Stiles yanked the door open without further ado. The screech the metal caught the attention of the walkers lining the hall. They ambled over slowly as Kira stepped out, drawing her sword up high.

“Do not go to them. Let them come to you.” He instructed as he joined her in the hall. They did not move more than ten feet from the stairwell. “Going straight at them is how you get killed. It’s how we lost Erica.”

“And Boyd.” Liam admitted somberly. “We almost lost Cora with him.”

“Some people never learn.” Stiles muttered. “Let’s-“

“Whoa.” Malia exclaimed as the group stumbled when a gust of wind caused the building to sway. “That felt, uh, not good.”
“We need to get as much done as we can. If the wind gets worse, we’ll bail.” He would rather abort the mission than put them at risk by continuing the search in a structurally compromised building. “Do we need to vote it? No one will fault you for leaving if you don’t feel safe.”

“We’re good.” The coyote insisted. “Let’s do this.”

As if Malia’s voice commanded it, three walkers were suddenly in front of them. Kira did not hesitate for a second. She swung her sword at the head of the walker closest to her. It sliced through the biter’s skull easily, exiting just as another came up beside it. The momentum from her original swing carried her sword through the remaining two nearest to her.

“Nice.” Stiles praised her, ogling her sword. “I want one.”

“We all want one. She doesn’t share.” Liam pouted.

“It’s a kitsune thing. My mom taught me before she…” Kira trailed off, a telling sign that something terrible had happened to her mother, something she could not speak of. “Um, if you had your own sword I could teach you.”

“I’ll keep my eyes peeled for one on the next run.” He told her before noticing a walker coming their way. “Another costumer.”

“Got it.” The kitsune readied herself for another go.

“Actually, you mind if I do it?” He didn’t want to step on her toes, especially when they had already agreed that she would be main line of defense. “I don’t get out much and I don’t want my skills to get rusty.”

“Sure.”

He almost wanted to make a show of it. These three had never seen what he could do. Nearly two years on the road had taught him more than a few tricks. The only reason he did not get flashy was because showing off was a quick way to get yourself killed.

He kept it simple. He let the first one get within arm’s length before he stabbed it in the forehead. No fuss, no muss. Numbers two and three went relatively the same way. Four tripped over the body of one of its fallen undead brethren, making Stiles bend down to shove a knife into the back of its head. Six veered off course, tottering into an open office. Number seven got close then stumbled, giving Stiles the chance to plunge his blade into its eye socket.

“That takes care of the hall. Let’s take out the walkers in the rooms and then start searching for supplies.” Stiles said as he pulled his knife free, cringing at the squelching sound it made. “Ugh.”

“Oh, gross.” Liam gagged at the sight of the eyeball stuck on the end of the blade.

“I’m not going to lie, a part of me wants to dare one of you to eat this.” Stiles laughed as he peeled the eye off his weapon and flung it down the corridor. “It’s comforting to know we still have the ability to be grossed out by things.”

“Can we just…” Kira shuddered in the direction of where the eyeball landed. “Get back to what we are supposed to be doing?”

“Yeah. Okay.”
Jax left the baby in Tara’s care shortly after Opie left to check in on the build team. He headed off to the police department, a trip he had been meaning to make once he had more information on the possible breach. With that information on hand, he figured he might as well get the meeting over with.

“Hey, Chief,” He flashed Eglee a bright grin as he sauntered up to her desk. “How are you today?”

“Nursing a migraine.” She brought up a hand to rub circles on her temples. “Courtesy of the prisoner and his lovely daughter. Tell me you have something for me.”

“That depends. Do you want a baby?”

“What? No.” Yeah, she didn’t seem like the maternal type. “Why would you even ask me that?”

“Never mind.” He would have to wait to see how Tara’s plan went in regards to the kid. “The Mazda is nothing to worry about. Opie and I checked it out this morning.”

“Good.” Her shoulders sagged in relief. “You want to chat with the perp?”

“Yeah. You get anything out of him?” With any luck, she had and it would shorten this talk immensely.

“He’s just been spouting off the same crap he was yelling at Kozik.” That was a ‘no’ then. “His daughter isn’t being helpful either. She’s still here, by the way.”

“Great.” One more person he would have to deal with.

“Hey, you know that I adore Stiles.” Jax was aware of her fondness for his little brother. “I trust his judgment, but I think he may have jumped the gun with some of these people.”

“He was giving them the benefit of the doubt.” As they did with anyone who came through the gates. “We need to do that to. We need to give them a little more time to settle in before making any rash decisions. If they continue to be a problem we will bring it up at a future council meeting.”

“Jackson Teller being reasonable.” Eglee clucked her tongue. “It must really be the end of the world.”

“Shut up.” He was very reasonable, compared to the rest of the club, which was not saying much. “You got any ideas about how to deal with this guy? Benefit of the doubt or not, he still needs to be punished for going after Kozik.”

“Honestly, I don’t know.” She sighed tiredly. “If this was a few years ago I would send him off to county for however long the court decided he needed to be there. That’s not really an option now.”

“Tough to do when we don’t have a court system or access to the county jail.” There were not enough citizens in Charming to justify reestablishing those things. “What’s the plan, Chief? It’s gotta be the department’s decision.”

“For one, I’m going to keep his bow in lockdown unless he decides to leave town, then it will be returned. Or he can check it out if he assists on runs.” They had never had to resort to that kind of penalty until now, but this was a new situation. “We allow citizens to carry weapons in case a walker breaches the walls, but there has to be a line, rules. If someone uses their weapons to
threaten another citizen, then it will be confiscated.”

“I completely agree.” They could not let people just skate by if they put someone else’s life in jeopardy. “But most have a personal weapons cache at home. They’ll just replace the one you take with another.”

“Confiscation and a warning will be for first time offenders.”

“What are you going to do about repeat offenders?”

“I don’t know, dude. I’m making this up as I go.” She huffed indignantly. “The rules of law I learned as a deputy don’t apply the way they used to.”

“You’ll figure it out.” He had faith in Eglee’s skills, if he didn’t, she would not be the Chief. “I still have some things to ask Argent before you cut him loose.”

“Come on.” She stood from her desk and began leading him to the back of the station. “Maybe you will have better luck with him.”

Considering Jax’s form of interrogation was a heavier in the violence than hers, he was sure he could get whatever he needed out of Argent. Unfortunately, his technique was frowned upon outside the club. He was going to have to be a bit more diplomatic with official prisoners than he was with club enemies.

“Here we are.” Eglee announced as she opened the door to the holding cell area. “You want him in interrogation?”

“No. This is fine.” He did not want to prolong this any longer than he had to.

“What do you want?” Argent’s daughter folded her arms over her chest defensively as she confronted him.

“I need to talk to your father.” Why the hell else would he be there?

“No.” She blocked his view of the man in the cell. “You’ve done enough.”

“I haven’t done anything.”

“You locked him up.”

“I locked him up in here.” Eglee clarified, taking full responsibility for the arrest. “He threatened a member of our community. He had to be held accountable. After he answers a few questions for Jax, he will be free to go.”

“What questions?” Chris spoke up, coming to stand by the bars. “I have questions of my own.”

“How did you find out about the car parked outside the walls?” Jax already knew what Argent wanted to know, so he would ask his own questions first. “The sooner you give me an answer, the quicker you can get out of here.”

“I went to talk to the CC Team about the job, to see if there was anything Allison and I needed to know about it. I overheard them talking about the Mazda.” Argent explained, placing the blame on the CC Team, who were all SAMCRO prospects. “Why didn’t you make an announcement about the threat the minute you knew about it?”

“I did not want to cause a panic.” People tended to become irrational and unpredictable if they
thought their lives were in danger. “There is no threat. The car was empty.”

“Empty?”

Yeah.” He would keep the baby’s existence an in house matter until they were certain what happened to its parents. “It’s got a busted radiator. Not an easy fix when you’re on the move. We have a team combing perimeter around it for any signs of its owner.”

“What makes you think the owner is not already inside the walls?” It was a legitimate question, Jax could not really fault him for asking.

“They would have to scale three walls without being spotted by any of our guards.” That was not an easy feat. “It is all under control.”

“Sure it is.” Argent snorted.

“I understand your distrust of this place and why you would do your own investigation to make sure that it is safe.” Jax glanced pointedly at Allison. “I have two kids and a baby brother. There is nothing I wouldn’t do to protect them. That is how you know this place is safe, because I would never put my family in danger.”

“You just let people walk in here without vetting them first.” Chris noted harshly. “That is what you did with us. You have no idea what kind if people you are bringing into this town when you do things that way.”

“We’re pretty good judges of character.” If even one of them got a bad vibe from someone, they found a way around letting them in.

“You let a murderer in when you let my group in.” The hunter told him. “Peter Hale. Did you know about him? He killed his own niece and my sister. Is that the kind of person you want in here with your kids and brother?”

“I let you in too.” Chris could shove his self-righteousness up his ass, in Jax’s opinion. “And you’re no better than you believe he is.”

“Excuse me?” Both Argents took offense to his claim.

“How many innocent werewolf packs did you and your family annihilate before you realized your father and sister did not give a shit about that code you supposedly followed?” Argent’s face scrunched up in an ugly sneer at Jax’s accusation. “Stiles told me about your family. He told me a little about everyone in the pack, the ones that he knew anyway. The one thing I gathered from all of it is that there is not one person in your group with clean hands. They are all dripping with blood.”

“He’s lying.”

“I don’t think he is.” Stiles had told Jax about the pack long before they had shown up at the gates, during a time when he had no reason to lie about them. “We’ve all done things and we are all still here. The only thing that matters now is keeping our families alive. To do that, we need people and this place. We all need to work together.”

“I don’t know you. I don’t trust you.” That was glaringly obvious. “I don’t believe a damn thing coming out of your mouth.”

“Then what the hell are you even doing in my town?”
“Because I want to believe you.” Chris admitted begrudgingly. “For my daughter’s sake.”

“Give it some time. You’ll see that we are not all bad.” Trust was not built in a day or a week. It took time and effort. “For now, you are free to go.”

“Go where?”

“Back to your house.” Jax had no plans to kick them out of Charming just yet. “You both can start work with the CC Team tomorrow, if the storm passes by then.”

“Your crossbow will remain in the evidence locker.” Eglee informed the hunter as she unlocked the cell door. “You can check it out if you plan to go outside the walls and check it in when you come back through the gates.”

“I thought you didn’t take peoples weapons?” Argent grumbled as he stepped out of the cell.

“That was before you threatened one of my guys.” Chris was lucky the cops didn’t confiscate all of his weaponry. “I’m sure Chief Eglee will allow you to earn it back somehow.”

“I’ll think of something for you to do.” She nodded. “It won’t be today.”

“I suggest you both get some food and something warm to drink, then head home until the rain stops.” Which did not look to be any time soon. “You may want to pick up some candles and extra blankets in case the power goes out.”

Stiles sent his trio of supernatural creatures down to the lower levels of the hospital when lunchtime rolled around. He handed them the sandwiches Gemma had made and told them to return to the fifth floor when they were finished. It gave them a chance to spend time with their pack mates and Stiles a chance to be alone for a few precious moments.

It had been a busy day so far. They had made better time clearing the fourth floor than he had expected. They hadn’t found anything more than a few stray bottles of blood thinners, in a previously raided pharmacy, and an EKG machine they would have to go back for before they called it quits for the day. The fifth floor had already proved to be more fruitful and they were able to clear half a dozen rooms before taking a break for their afternoon meal.

While the pack ate together downstairs, Stiles stayed in a corner office they had already searched. He dragged the office chair over to the large window that overlooked the town. He watched the rain fall, and the wind blow so hard it was made the bell tower of the church two blocks away sway precariously.

Instinctually, Stiles whipped his head toward the communications tower. It was too far away to get a proper view, but when he squinted his eyes, he could see it careen dangerously to the side.

“Shit.” He grabbed his walkie-talkie from its place on the window sill to call out to the tower. “Juice? Sergio? Danny? Anybody there?”

“I’m here.” Juice responded. “Sergio left already. It’s just me and Danny. What’s going on?”

“Maybe, uh, maybe it’s time to call it a day.” He said worriedly as a strong gust shook the hospital violently, causing ceiling tiles to fall around Stiles. “Fuck.”
“I just started my shift. I’ve got eleven hours and forty-five minutes until I’m free to go home.”

“Make an exception today.” The storm was only getting worse and the communications tower was an old building that would crumble easily under the right pressure. “Get out of there before the wind knocks it over or it gets struck by lightning.”

“There’s no lightnin-“ The Son was cut off by a loud roar of thunder and a sharp burst of light. “Son of a bitch.”

“Get the hell out of there, please.” Stiles pleaded.

“We’re going.” Juice ceded. “Get your crew out of St. Thomas. It’s a hell of a lot less stable than any other building in town.”

“I will.” The hospital was a hazardous place to be on a good day, it was a damn death trap during a storm. “Can you do me a favor?”

“What is it?”

“Go by the school house on your way home. Shut it down for the day.” He would do it himself, but Juice was closer to it than he was. “Pick up Abel and Thomas, take them to our house. Tara’s going to be busy at the clinic and Jax will probably be making the rounds around town. Someone has to look after them.”

“I’ll get them.” Juice promised. “Stop by the General Store on your way home, grab some canned soup. Our cabinets are empty and we need to feed the kids.”

“I’ll pick up a few things.” They would need more than soup to feed two growing boys. “I gotta radio Tara, let her know we’re taking the kids, and then I gotta get my crew out of here. I’ll see you in a little while.”

He let that be their goodbye and clipped his radio to his belt before climbing to his feet. He clutched his knife in his grip as he made his way to the door. He barely had it opened before it was pushed back against him, forcing him to the wall.

“Shit.” Undead hands grabbed with him as the walker showed itself from behind the door. “That is the second time today…”

He had been so sure that they had cleared the hall that he let the biter take him by surprise. It took him a moment to regain his bearings, once he did he was able to shove his knee upward, into the walkers gut, shoving it back several feet. The distance allowed him to thrust his blade into the walkers chin until the hilt met bone and the biter ceased its movements.

“Nice try, bro.” He yanked his knife free and let the body drop to the floor. “I’m not that easy to kill, but you get an ‘A’ for effort.”

He steeled himself this time, not about to let anything or anyone get the upper hand on him again. He glanced around the door, hoping that walker was an anomaly, and breathed a sigh of relief when he realized it was. He didn’t waste any time darting to the stairwell. He made sure the metal door was secure before bolting down the steps, taking them two at a time until he reached the lower level.

“Idiots.” He mumbled when he saw the door to the imaging floor wide open instead of latched closed like he told the pack to keep it. “They have supernatural hearing yet none of them listen.”
He made a point of slamming it shut as loudly as he could. The *boom* of it echoed down the long corridor and was followed by the sound of rushing footsteps. He made sure to paint on his best disappointed face as the group rounded the corner.

“Mission is scrapped until the storm passes. You can all go home.” He would give them a stern talking to about keeping the doors closed the next time they worked at the hospital.

“Where are you going?” Scott questioned uncertainly.

“Home.” He would be spending the rest of the night playing board games with Juice and the kids. “I’m babysitting my nephews. So, let’s hurry this along.”

“Okay.”

Jax shook himself off like a dog as he entered the clinic for the second time that day. The rain seemed to be coming down harder with every passing second. He was thankful for the small reprieve he had inside the building.

“It’s getting bad out there.” A female voice mentioned.

“Yes ma’am.” He lifted his gaze to meet a familiar face in nurse’s scrubs. “How is your first day going, Ms. McCall?”

“Good. Busy, but good.” She smiled softly before taking on a serious expression. “Look, I wanted to apologize for Chris Argent’s behavior. We’ve tried speaking to him about it. We never thought he would go this far. To threaten one of your people…. I’m sorry.”

“No need to apologize.” It was Argent, not Melissa. “It’s been dealt with. Mr. Argent has been released.”

“I’m glad you could work it out. It’s just…” She wrung her hands nervously. “You have to understand, we were on the road a long time. Being around new people, this many people, is strange and scary. We’ve had bad experiences. We just need a little time to learn how to be *human* again.”

“I get it, Ms. McCall.” He understood better than she probably realized. “It’s a process, one I watched my brother go through when he came home. It’s a process he is still going through. You all need time and you will have it. And to be clear, if it ever came down to it, the entire group would not be banished for the crimes of one person.”

“That’s reassuring.” She was not reassured at all if the anxiety radiating off her meant anything. “Can I, um….-. I know how you feel about the pack in regards to Stiles. I’m trying to respect that.”

“I appreciate that.” It was nice to know at least one person was following his rules.

“Can you just tell me how he is?” There was a hint of desperation in her tone. She did not *want* to know, but she *needed* to know. “John and I made a deal at the evacuation center. If something were to happen to one of us, the other would do everything they could to care for the child left behind. I promised John I would take care of his son.”

“You broke your promise.” He could not help but throw it in her face, to take a little pleasure in the guilt that quickly took up residence there.
“Jackson,” Tara snapped at him from the doorway of her office. “Are you here to see me?”

“Yeah.”

“Then come here.” She ordered, grabbing his arm and pulling him in before he could react.

“You pissed at me?” He asked as she shut the door behind them.

“I don’t appreciate you harassing my staff.” She narrowed her eyes in disapproval.

“I was not harassing her. She asked me a question, I answered.” He was in no way nice about it, but oh well. “I won’t apologize for telling the truth.”

“Uh-huh.” His wife did not seem pleased by that, but dropped it anyway. “Not that I’m not happy to see you, but what are you doing here?”

“We’re shuttering up the town for the night.” They didn’t have a choice given the weather. “Aside from the wall guard, and here, everyone is closing up shop.”

“I’ll send the others home. I’ll stay myself, in case of an emergency.” Tara, being the only doctor, had to be the one to stick around long after everyone else had left.

“I’m going to put out the word, make sure people get home okay, and then I’m going to come back and spend the night here with you.” He refused to leave his wife alone in the clinic all night. “The boys—”

“Are spending the night with uncle Stiles. Juice is picking them up as we speak. Stiles radioed me just before you showed up. He volunteered to take them.” That was awfully nice of him. “He shut his team down early, told Juice to do the same with the tower and the school.”

“Those are three stops I do not have to make then.”

“The baby you brought in needs to stay here for the night. He spiked a fever that I want to keep an eye on.” She gestured to the infant who was currently sleeping in a file cabinet drawer. “Think you can pick up the old playpen from our place on your way back?”

“Yeah.” They could not let the poor kid go from sleeping in a car trunk to a cabinet drawer. “I’ll pick up dinner too.”

“Thank you.”

“Jax,” Kozik’s panicked voice sounded over the walkie-talkie. “The wind knocked the chainlink down.”

“Fuck.”
The storm hadn’t let up all day, if anything it had gotten worse. The streets were beginning to flood from the heavy rainfall. The wind had caused the older buildings in town to sway dangerously, as well as having knocked over the chainlink and anything else that wasn’t nailed down.

“Shit.” Chibs muttered at Jax’s side as they took stock of the damage at the wall.

The fence had bent in half under the force of the wind. The posts were still firmly dug into the dirt floor, but the top of the chain mesh was scratching at the steel wall. The walkers from the surrounding woods had ambled out at the sound it made and began using the fallen fence to get to higher ground.

“We gotta do something about this before it gets out of hand. It’s only a matter of time before they make it up here.” Opie theorized bleakly.

It worked almost like a stepladder. One or more of the biters fell, their feet slipping through the holes in the chain link. The walkers around them would stumble over the bodies, fall, and create another step in the dead flesh staircase.

“What do you suggest?” Jax opened the floor to anyone who could come up with a viable plan.

“We can’t jump down and try to take them all out. There’s too many of them.”

“We can get between the walls. We wait for them to fall between ‘em too, and take ‘em out as they drop.” Tig threw a very time consuming idea out there.

“Put silencers on the rifles and pistols. Have some target practice.” Piney offered his own solution. “It ain’t gonna do much good in the long run. They’ll keep coming out of the woods and off the road.”

“We need to get the fence back up.” Which would not be an easy feat in the current weather. “Or take it down.”

“Flatten it to the ground, so the walkers can’t use it as leverage to climb up here.” Opie suggested, scratching his beard thoughtfully. “Do it in sections. Clear out the walkers in one spot, pull the fence down, and repeat until the whole thing is in the dirt.”

“When the weather clears we’ll put it back up.” There was no telling when that would be. “That’s going to take a lot of ammo.”

“We don’t have much of a choice.” Not unless they wanted biters wandering between the two remaining walls. “The only wall reinforced is the one closest to town. Enough of them push against the outer one and it would not take much to bring it down, especially with the wind helping things along.”
“We need to call in the team out looking for the baby’s parents.” Jax hated to call off the search so soon, but they needed all hands on deck to handle the storm. “Have they checked in?”

“No. I’ve got nothing but static on the walkies.” Chibs waved the device in his hands.

“Not to pile on more shit, but,” Kozik sighed and jerked his head toward the east side of town. “Aren’t those our crops?”

Jax turned his head to the farm and immediately wished he hadn’t. There was a tower of flames coming off the plot of land that held their main source of food. If he squinted his eyes, he could vaguely make out the silhouettes of people running toward it, hopefully armed with something to assist in putting out the blaze.

“Son of a bitch!” Jax scrubbed a hand down his face in irritation. “With any goddamn luck the rain will help put it out before it spreads too far. How the fuck did it even start?”

“I don’t know.” Kozik shook his head. “The storm’s buggin’ out the signal on the walkies, so I can’t find out.”

“Opie, Chibs, go check it out.” Jax ordered the pair. “Grab some civilian volunteers to help get it under control. Anyone not helping needs to stay the fuck indoors.”

“All right.”

“Opie, pick up the prospects. Take them with you. Chibs, go by your place, send Juice this way so he can help with the clearing.” The best way to get things done was to divide and concur. “Tell Stiles to drop the boys off with Gemma and then take him to the farm with you.”

“The farm?” Opie faltered on his descent down the rope ladder. “You want him to help with the fire? You sure about that?”

“Yeah. Why…-“ He wanted to smack himself when he realized the reasoning behind Opie’s hesitance. “Fire. Stiles. No. Let him choose. He can come out here or go to the farm.”

“Aye. Will do.” Chibs agreed before following the VP down the wall.

“We need rifles, silencers, and head lamps from the armory.” The Pres looked to Tig for the items. “Grab some of the road flares and glow sticks too.”

“Got it.”

“The search team shouldn’t be that far away. We’ll light a flare to get their attention.” They would see it and know it was time to head back. “They won’t be able to make it up here with all those walkers built up. They’ll have to fight ‘em off from behind.”

“Or climb one of those trees, keep to high ground.” Piney nodded toward the treeline. “Take the biters out from a distance. The guns they took with them should already have silencers, so they could do it quietly. Who’s out there anyway?”

“Happy and Rat.” Rat was the only prospect worth a damn and had stepped up with Hap to go search for a family that was probably dead already. “They’ll be okay.”

There were some days Stiles woke up feeling as if he was trapped in a nightmare he would never wake from. That feeling would stay with him all day. He would trudge on with his normal duties
lethargically, mechanically. Those were the day when all he wanted was to retreat to a dark corner, to close his eyes and wish they would never open again. Those were the bad days.

The truth was, he had more bad days than good. He spent more time wanting to be back in a time when the world made sense, when he still had his dad, than he did in the real world. He would forget what he still had. He took the family still with him for granted.

The good days often took him by surprise. He would look at something or someone and realize he was content or even happy. It was seeing Jax or Opie laughing. It was Nate looking at him and seeing him and not someone else. It was waking up with Juice by his side. Mostly, though, it was Abel and Thomas.

Their smiles, seeing their faces lit up with excitement, gave Stiles hope. Their innocence, the fact that they still had some, made Stiles believe there was still a chance for them to grow up. They could have lives. They could do so much more than simply survive.

“Uncle Stiles,” Abel smacked a palm against the table. “It’s your turn.”

“What?” He unwillingly pulled his eyes from Thomas, who was grinning from ear-to-ear while he and Juice played with Legos on the carpet in the living room. “Sorry. What do you need?”

“It’s your turn.” His older nephew repeated, gesturing to the chessboard on the table in front of them.

“Oh.” He obediently moved his knight, leaving his king open to be captured.

“You’re letting me win.” The boy claimed indignantly. “It’s insulting.”

“My apologies.” He gave the boy a regretful smile. “I’m trying to build up your confidence.”

“I am confident that I can beat you at this game, ‘cause I’m smart.” Abel sat back in his chair with a cocky smirk on his face, looking remarkably like Jax. “I’m the smartest in my class.”

“Yeah, well, I was the smartest kid in my class too.” He even attended a private school for gifted children for all of a semester, before he intentionally got himself kicked out. “The only thing that got me was into trouble.”

“That’s because you’re a troublemaker.” The boy giggled. “Grandma and Daddy both said so.”

“You won’t hear me denying it.” Gemma and Jax describing him as a troublemaker was a bit like the pot calling the kettle black. “It’s not entirely my fault. Instead of my teachers nurturing my genius, they punished me for it.”

“What about your dad?”

“What about him?”

“Did he punish you for being smart?”

“No. No, he was great about it.” His dad always went the extra mile to understand how he thought and how his brain worked. “I would get into trouble for correcting my teachers in class, and he always went to the principal to raise hell about it. He would refuse to let them give me detention or suspend me for being smarter than them. He would tell them that if I needed to correct my teachers that often, then they needed better teachers.”
“Wow.” The boy tilted his head to the side to give Stiles a considering look. “Uncle Stiles?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you…” Abel bit his lip nervously before continuing. “Do you miss your dad?”

“Every second of every day.”

“He was a good dad?” Stiles forgot sometimes that Abel and Thomas had only met his dad once or twice. They never had a chance to know him.

“Best dad ever.” There was not one person in the world that could measure up to him. “Why the questions about my pops?”

“You never really talk about him.” Abel acknowledged calmly. “When you do, though, you get happy and sad. You always seem sad. I like it better when you’re happy.”

Stiles was not quite sure how to respond to that. It was a sweet sentiment, but heavy talk coming from a little boy. Abel had never given him any indication that he could see him so clearly, could read him like a book. It was a little disconcerting.

To his luck, he was saved from responding at all when the front door swung open. Chibs shook himself off like a wet dog, rainwater dripping off him in every direction as he stepped into the house. The Scot ran a hand through his soaked hair before leveling Stiles with a grim look.

“Arm up, laddie.”

“What?” Juice abandoned his building with Thomas to stand beside Stiles at the dining room table and address Chibs. “What’s going on?”

“Boys, get your things together. You’re gonna spend the night with Grandma.” Chibs not so subtly hinted for the children to leave the room. “Juicy, you need to get to the wall.”

“Okay.” The Son waited for the kids to skedaddle before questioning the Scot’s order. “Why?”

“The fence is down.” Chibs explained hurriedly. “Stiles, you get a choice. Help with the walkers at the wall or the fire at the farm.”

“The farm is on fire?” They had only been in the house for an hour or so and all hell was breaking loose outside. “I’ll go where I’m needed. Where am I needed?”

“Jax wanted you at the farm, but-“

“Then I’ll go to the farm.” Stiles stood from his chair, snatching his jacket from the back and slipping it on. “We’ll drop the boys off on the way. Did you bring the truck? I don’t want them out in this rain.”

“I got the pick-up. Juicy, you’re going to have to walk. It’s not safe to be on your bike.” Chibs informed the other man. “Let’s go, kids. We don’t have time to waste.”

By the time Opie had arrived at the farm, the fire had already burned through the patches of onions and carrots, and was quickly making its way through the lettuce, spinach, and kale. It was only a matter of time before it reached the chicken coup, the cow pasture, and the barn. While the rain was doing what it could to keep the flames at bay, the wind was helping push it further along.
“Shit.” He grumbled under his breath as he made his way to Oswald. “How’d this happen?”

“Lightning hit the field. It went up before we even realized what was happening.” Oswald replied solemnly. “I’ve got guys out with every available hose trying to put it out. As you can see, it’s not doing much good yet.”

“We need to contain it.” If they could not put it out in a timely fashion, then they needed to prevent it from spreading into town. “We can build a barrier with those extra steel panels we have, the ones we’re supposed to reinforce the second wall with. If we start at the access road and stop at the reservoir, we can cut off the blaze before it can hit the residential area. It might hold long enough for us to get the fire out.”

“It could buy us some time, but we got more to worry about than the flames reaching the houses. The crops are gone. There’s no saving ‘em. The cows and pigs, the chickens and horses, those are another story.” Oswald made a good point. “We need to move them or the fire will burn through them too.”

“We need teams.” They had to break into groups so they could get everything done before it was too late. “You take whoever you need to get the animals out. I’ll grab some folks and start on the blockade. Chibs will help put out the blaze.”

“Where do you want us?” A new voice questioned, causing Opie to whip his head around to see who had joined them, only to find Scott and his friends. “We saw the flames from our house. We want to help.”

“You’ll probably spook the animals.” Given their own animalistic natures, it would be a bad combination, but their supernatural strength could come in handy in another area. “You all come with me. Oswald, take the prospects with you to help with the livestock.”

“All right.” Oswald nodded. “Let’s go.”

Oswald took his assigned team and headed toward the barn, while Opie gestured for the pack to follow him. They walked to the south end of the property where the build team’s supplies were located. The steel plates were lying flat on the ground, waiting to be cut and welded into supports for the outermost wall surrounding the town.

“We’re going to use those to make a barrier to cut the fire off at the pass.” It was not a full proof plan, but it was the best they could do for now. “We’ll use the forklift to get them where they need to be. Any of you not have extra strength or think you would be better off helping out somewhere else?”

“I’m immune to fire.” One the men raised his hand, Parrish, if Opie remembered correctly. “I could help put it out. Get in closer than the others can.”

“Okay. You’ll report to Chibs when he gets here. Go ahead.” Opie ushered the man off. “Anyone else?”

“We sent the humans to the clinic to help out. Figured it would probably be busy because of the storm and the fire.” Scott was not wrong about that. “They all have basic first aid training. We thought they could help with small stuff. Take a load off the staff.”

“Thanks.” He was sure Tara appreciated that. “The rest of you will help me with this, but if they need extra bodies somewhere else, then you’ll be moved accordingly.”

“Okay.”
“Let’s get started.”

Stiles had no idea what to expect when he and Chibs pulled up to the farm, but their main food supply being burnt to a crisp was definitely not it. He knew there was a fire, he had been told as much and it was visible from any point in town, but he did not think it would be this bad. The damage it had already done was catastrophic and was only getting worse.

“Jesus.” There was weeks, months, worth of food going up in flames right in front of him. “This is…”

“I know.” Chibs draped a comforting hand on his back. “Don’t worry about what we’re losing, what we won’t have later. Worry about the problem at hand.”

“That is the problem at hand.”

“No. That’s a long term issue.” The Scot insisted. “Right now, we focus on getting that fire out and saving what we can.”

“Yeah. Okay.” It was the only thing they could do.

He sighed as he trailed after Chibs, following him to a row of steel plates that were in the process of being stood up to make some kind of barrier. He noticed several pack members holding them up while Opie rigged them together. It was a trying task with the weather working against them and the fire getting closer.

“Where do you need us, Opie?” Chibs questioned the bigger man.

“Over there.” The VP jerked a thumb toward the blaze.

Stiles eyes caught on the flames coming off the stocks. It was enchanting the way they danced in the night sky. The heat of it only pushed back by the violent gusts of wind.

“Stiles!” Strong fingers wrapped around the nape of his neck and gave him a good shake in an effort to capture his attention.

“What?” He forced his gaze from the fire to the person in front of him. “What’s going on, Opie?”

“Hey,” His brother leaned in close to whisper in his ear, a sad attempt to keep the conversation private. “You with me?”

“Yeah.” He pulled back far enough to offer Opie a reassuring smile. “Tell me what I’m doing.”

“You can help with this.” The tone of Opie’s voice let him know that was where he wanted Stiles to be. “Or put the fire out.”

“I’ll help you here.” He did not want to put any more stress on Opie by making him worry about his state of mind. “What do you want me to do?”

“Help bolt these together and the get the supports on.” He handed over a sack of tools. “You work one end and I’ll work the other end.”

Stiles had helped put up the walls around town, so he was sure Opie was putting this one up the hard way. Some of what the VP wanted done was usually done before the plates went up. Seeing as they were working in severe circumstances, they had to cut some corners.
“Okay.” He accepted the necessary equipment and moved to the opposite end of the makeshift blockade.

His section was surrounded by the Hale men. Derek and Peter were holding up separate steel plates, waiting for them to be rigged together. They were both soaked from the rain, their bodies shaking, either from the cold or the exertion of the work.

It was not until Stiles slipped on the work gloves over his usual leather ones did he realize the significance of their grouping. He, Derek, and Peter had all been touched by fire in one way or another. Now, they were trying to keep it from harming someone else.

“Uh, you guys all right?” His eyes flitted between the pair skeptically, wondering if perhaps this was not the right job for them.

“Worried for us, Stiles? That is so sweet.” Peter drawled. “And a little ironic, considering you had a helping hand in setting me on fire once before. In all fairness, I was one of the people who left you to burn to death. So let’s call it even.”

“Peter.” Derek used only his uncle’s name to caution the man to tread lightly or not at all when it came to that particular topic.

“Sure, Creeper, we’re even.” Stiles chuckled at the sheer ridiculousness of it. “We’re both still kicking. That’s all that matters, right?”

“Of course.” The elder Hale agreed. “How’s your damage, anyway?”

“My damage?” That was a loaded question if he had ever heard one.

“Your fire induced injuries. You’re human, you scar.” Peter’s eyes roamed over Stiles body, as if those scars were visible above his clothing. “May I see them?”

“What?” Seriously, what?

“Peter!” A low growl emitted from Scott's throat. The alpha was closer to Opie than he was to Stiles, but he was obviously eavesdropping on the conversation.

“Why do you want to see them?” Stiles didn’t even like seeing them and he had to every time he removed his shirt. “You had your own at one point.”

“I’m curious.” Peter shrugged his shoulders. “Yours are permanent, mine were not. I just want a peek.”

“Then you will shut up and focus on what you’re doing?” In all honesty, it did not take much focus to use brute force to hold up steel plates.

“Yes.” The wolf used his index finger to trace an ‘X’ over his heart, as if he were swearing to it.

“Fine.”

Stiles knew Peter had an alternative motive. The older Hale always had an agenda. Nevertheless, against his better judgment, Stiles reached up to pull down the collar of his shirt, revealing the barest amount of marred skin to the world. There was only the smallest patch of silver scarring available to see but it was enough to elicit a reaction from those around him.

Derek had stopped what he was doing, his gaze caught on the band of skin, and an unreadable
expression on his face. There were a few sounds of shock, barely muted by hands covering mouths, and identical grimaces of pity from other pack members. It was nothing Stiles hadn’t experienced before in regards to his old injuries.

He glanced at Peter, the one who requested to view the damage, in hopes of acquiring an answer as to why he wanted to see in the first place. The wolf’s eyes weren’t on him though, instead they were locked on Scott. Stiles took in the alpha’s features and finally understood what was really going on.

The game of Show and Tell was never about him. It was about Scott. It was about Peter and Scott. The former alpha was trying to teach the reigning pack leader a lesson and was using Stiles to do it. From the look on Scott’s face, it was working.

Scott’s stare, much like Derek’s, was fixed on Stiles chest. The alpha had gone rigid at the sight of him. Tears filled his eyes the longer they lingered, and a grave expression of guilt clouded his features.

“Get back to work.” Stiles snapped, suddenly angry. He pulled the collar of his shirt back up, hiding his scars from sight. “Peep shows over.”

“Stiles—“ Scott tried to speak to him, going as far as to take a few steps toward him, leaving his post in the process.

“Back to work.” He ordered, watching the plate Scott had been holding up lean precariously forward. The other wolf, Liam, attempted to pick up the slack, but was not strong enough on his own. “Unless you want your beta to be crushed.”

“Crap.” The alpha scampered back to the steel plate, taking the weight Liam could not handle.

“It might be a little late to bring this up, but isn’t it kind of stupid to be holding onto these in the middle of a thunderstorm?” Malia asked, slapping a hand against the sheet of metal she was holding up. “I mean, doesn’t metal attract lightning?”

“Actually, that’s a myth. Lightning isn’t—“ Stiles explanation was cut off by a bright flash, a loud roar, and a bolt of light striking the grass beside them. “Um…”

“You were saying?” Opie yelled from his end of the work line.

“It hit the ground not the wall!” His point still held merit.

“I guess we should be thankful it didn’t start another fire.” Cora muttered.

“The one already raging is doing enough damage. Look at that.” Kira pointed to a spot behind them.

Stiles turned to face the fire once more, his stomach dropping at the sight he found. The flames were climbing the barn, overtaking the old wood, causing it to cave in and collapse. He flinched involuntarily at the harsh sound it made as it hit the ground and the screams that followed soon after.

“Oh my god.”

There were multiple barns on the property. Some were for the livestock, while the others were used for storage. The one that went down was filled with fruits and vegetables from their recent harvest. It was all waiting to be cleaned, sorted, and packed. The vast majority of it was to be canned or
jarred, preserved for future use during the winter. It was all gone now. They would not be able to put out the flames in time to save any of it.

“This is pointless.” The barrier would temporarily prevent the town from being consumed by the flames, but it would not stop them all from succumbing to starvation in the coming weeks. “We need a new plan.”

“I’m all ears if you’ve got one.” Opie abandon his workstation to confront Stiles. “No matter what, we cannot let the fire burn through the residential area. This wall has to go up.”

“Switch out the teams.” Stiles said, taking in the severity of the situation. “Send the pack to get the wounded from the fire-“

“I’m sorry, what? Send the pack where?” Malia gave him a look that suggested exactly where he could shove that idea.

“You all heal almost instantly, depending on how bad the wound is. You get burnt, you’ll heal.” He reasoned to the coyote. “Peter and I did.”

“He’s not wrong.” Peter nodded along with his plan.

“If they are going to the barn, who is going to help with the blockade?” Opie questioned. “It has to be done, Stiles.”

“Where are the prospects?”

“Moving the livestock with Oswald.” Well, they couldn’t pull them from that task, it was far too important. “Chibs has the farmhands and Parrish putting out the fire. The rest of the club is clearing the walkers at the gate.”

“Then they can spare a few people.” It should not take the majority of the club to clear a herd of biters. “I need to talk to Jax, so I’ll send a few people over when I get there. Not all of you need to help with search and rescue. Some of you can stay and help Opie. Okay, Scott?”

“Okay.”

“Opie, is that all right?”

“Yeah.”

They were making a considerable dent in the buildup of walkers by the chainlink. That was just about the only thing going their way. From his spot on top of the wall, Jax could see that the situation at the farm had only gotten worse. It was only his complete faith in the men he had sent over there that kept him from heading to the farm to check on things himself.

“Holy shit.” Tig huffed out a shaky breath after a gust of wind nearly knocked them off the wall and straight into the hoard below.

“I feel like we should be bungeed up here.” Juice mentioned as he regained his balance. “If the wind doesn’t push us off, the rain making the walkway up here slippery as hell is going to make one of us fall.”

“Be careful.” Jax instructed his men, keeping a close eye on Juice. “I’m not explaining to Stiles and Chibs why you’re hurt or dead if something happens to you out here.”
“Yeah, well, ditto.” Juice lowered himself down until he was sitting on the wall rather than standing upright. “I’m not explaining your untimely demise to Stiles and Opie or Tara and Gem.”

“That’s ‘cause you value your life.” Kozik patted the younger man on the back. “Gemma would kill you if you told her Jax was dead. Jax just doesn’t want to make his baby brother cry.”

“Can you guys focus?” Jax grumbled, settling down beside Juice, seeing how that would be the safer option to standing on wet steel.

“You got it, man.” Juice shot him a grin as he reloaded his pistol.

“You know, while we’re up here, Juice, we can have that talk.” Jax was both worried and a little curious about why the kid had tensed at the suggestion.

“What talk?” The Son feigned nonchalance as he lined up a headshot. “Something on your mind?”

“Opie keeps making these comments about Stiles having a conversation with me about you.” It was clear Opie knew something that he didn’t and being out of the loop was beginning to irritate him. “Want to tell me what’s going on?”

“Not really.” Juice answered a little too quickly and backtracked just as swiftly. “I mean, um, it’s something you should really talk to Stiles about.”

“Stiles isn’t here.” Even when he and his younger brother found time to chat, the kid never seemed inclined to discuss whatever was going on between he and Juice. “You are.”

“You wanted us to focus, remember?” The Son took out three walkers consecutively. “I’m focusing.”

“You’re a smart guy, more than capable of shooting and speaking at the same time.” They were both proving that point, emptying their clips in the heads of biters as they spoke. “What is Stiles supposed to tell me?”

“That we’re together.”

“I already knew that.” He had walked in on it once when the pair had gotten a little too handsy with one another at a SAMCRO party.

“No. We are together.” Juice stressed the word, as if that changed its meaning. “It’s not just sex. Stiles and I are in a relationship.”

“What the hell does that mean?” The echo of long-suffering sighs from the other club members present told him more than he probably needed to know. “Wait-“

“We live together, not only in the same house, but in the same room, the same bed.” Juice rubbed the back of his head nervously. “It’s not a fling or whatever. It’s-”

“They’re in love and all that goopy shit. In it for the long haul, like you and Tara.” Tig clarified what Juice was having trouble saying. “That about right, Juicy?”

“Uh, yeah. That’s, uh, that’s r-right.” The kid stuttered anxiously.

“It’s why he gets all snarky with you when it comes to letting Stiles off his leash.” Kozik added.

“Is that right?” It did explain Juice’s attitude toward him recently. “You’re sweet on my little brother, huh?”
“That is obvious to everyone but you, Jax.” Piney chuckled as his eyes swept the perimeter, catching on a figure on the town-side of the wall. “Speaking of your little brother…”

Jax jerked his head around to see what the old man was talking about. Stiles was running down the street, faster than Jax had ever seen him. He slid to a stop outside the first wall, scaling the rope ladder in what had to be record time. He stumbled on the wet surface of the walkway, but caught himself before he could topple over the edge.

“Did you run all the way here from the farm?” Kozik questioned incredulously.

“Out of shape, my ass.” Juice shook his head even as Stiles struggled to catch his breath. “Fucking breathe! Jesus.”

“Jax! I need to talk to you!” The younger man yelled hoarsely from his perch.

“Then come over here so I can fucking hear you!” The wall Stiles had climbed up on was too far away, they could never have a proper conversation at that distance, even without the wind howling.

“No time! You come to me!”

“It’ll take the same amount of time!” It was the same goddamn distance.

“Fuck it.” Stiles gave up, content to yell across to Jax. “We need an emergency run!”

“Not in this weather.” There was no way in hell he could authorize that. “Whatever it’s for, it has to wait until the storm passes.”

“There’s no time. That barn was the food we had stored for winter!” Stiles gestured wildly to the farm. “If we don’t go find more then we’ll starve to death!”

“It can wait!” It was barely November now. There was more than enough time to plan a run for a later date.

“No, it can’t!” His little brother argued. “The General Store and diner were supposed to restock from that barn next week.”

“He’s right.” Piney told him. “We can stretch the food out as long as can, but the sooner a run goes out the better.”

“The storm-“

“Does it look like it’s going to pass anytime soon?” Bobby nodded toward the cloudy sky. “It’s only getting worse.”

“We cannot send a team out in this.” It would be dangerous and irresponsible.

“I’ll go.” Stiles volunteered, because of fucking course he would. “I can do it. I’ve been on runs in worse weather than this.”

“Not since you’ve been home you haven’t.” Stiles had not been outside the walls since they went up.

“I’ll go with him.” Juice added his name to the nonexistent signup sheet. “Keep the team small. Just the two of us. We can be in and out quick.”
“‘In and out quick.’ This is a run not your sex life,” Tig quipped unhelpfully.

“Not the time, Tiggy.” Bobby chided while laughing along. “They’ve got a point. Two volunteers are safer than a full team.”

“The smaller the group going, the less supplies that need to go.” Stiles brought up a big advantage of a two-man team. “You’ll need those supplies here.”

“We’ll send out a team.” Jax could see he was outvoted on that decision anyway. “But not you. Juice and someone else.”

“For fuck’s sake, Jackson. Now is not the time to be a little bitch.” Stiles snarled in aggravation. “I have more experience being out there, by myself, than all of you combined. I said I was going, so I’m going to go. You don’t have to like it, just accept it. Is that clear?”

There were only two ways Jax could respond to that. Putting his foot down would start a fight, or a brawl, given Stiles current level of impatience. On the other hand, allowing Stiles to accompany Juice on the run would go against every instinct Jax had. It was a no-win situation, especially with Stiles putting his own foot down.

“Fuck. Fine. Okay. You can go.” Jax would live with the illusion that he had any goddamn say-so in the matter. “Juice, gather shit for the two of you at home and pick up the vehicle and run weapons from the clubhouse. Stiles, go pick up provisions from the store and the first-aid bag from the clinic.”

“Will do.” Juice handed off his borrowed pistol to Bobby as he stood. “We’ll take the Jeep.”

“I’m getting my Jeep back?” Stiles asked hopefully.

“Temporarily.” His brother was going to be pissed when he saw the modifications made to it. Course that was Juice’s problem, so whatever. “Be fucking careful. Please.”

“Always am.” Jax was kind enough not to call Stiles out on that lie. “You need to send a couple guys to the farm. Opie needs help.”

“Tig, Kozik, go.” He sent the men off. “Piney, Bobby, and I got this.”

“We’re going.” Tig and Kozik both climbed to their feet, prepared to go.

“Juice, do not forget the CB radio.” Jax reminded the Son. “Leave your route on the map in the clubhouse when you figure out where you’re going.”

“You got it.”

“Good. Now go.” The sooner they got this shitshow on the road, the sooner they would be back.

The clinic was packed with people. The waiting area was divided into sections based on how critical the injury or illness was. Those who were suffering from burns or bleeding profusely were at the front of the line. The others had a long night of waiting ahead of them.

Stiles spotted Tara and Melissa as soon as he came in. They were in one of the room’s, his view of them only partially obstructed by a flimsy curtain. The patient they were working on seemed pretty bad off. He was convulsing violently, Melissa was struggling to steady him while Tara maneuvered a tube down his throat.
It took Stiles a moment to notice Scott standing nearby. He was giving them room to work while keeping an eye on the things. The man on the table Stiles recognized as Todd, a farmhand of Oswald’s, and a Charming native. He was no one Scott would have known, but judging by the blood on the alpha’s shirt, it was easy to deduce that he had been the one to bring Todd in. Knowing Scott, he probably felt some sort of responsibility for the man now, and wanted to wait and see things through, make sure the guy would be okay before he left, and that just wouldn’t do.

“Hey,” Stiles called out to the wolf as he made his way through the crowd of people. “You can’t stay here, Scott.”


“You’re needed at the farm.” There was plenty of work to go around with the fire burning. “You can’t do anything for him. Tara and your mom will take care of him.”

“Stiles,” Tara’s concerned voice pulled at his attention. “What are you doing here? Is Jax okay? The boys?”

“They’re fine. The kids are with Gemma. Jax is at the wall.” He did his best to ease her fears. “There’s a run going out. I need the go-bag.”

“You know where to find it.” She kept one hand on the tube in Todd’s throat and used the other to remove a set of keys from her pocket, tossing them to him. “Grab me an IV bag of saline and some morphine while you’re in there.”

He gave her a nod of confirmation before heading toward the back of the clinic to the storage area. He unlocked the med locker and grabbed the small pack of first-aid supplies off the bottom shelf. He unloaded what could be spared. The kit was put together to care for groups of four to six, but seeing as it was just he and Juice this time, he was confident a good portion of the supplies could be left behind.

Once the bag was sufficiently packed, he found the items Tara had requested. He took extra care to secure the locker before jogging back to the triage area. He handed the saline off to Melissa and the morphine to Tara.

“Thank you.” His sister-in-law expressed her gratitude with a soft smile. “Who’s going on the run?”

“Me and Juice.” The good doctor could not hide her surprise or suspicion with her lips pursed and her eyes narrowed. “Jax knows.”

“He better.” She leaned over to kiss his cheek. “Stay safe.”

“Always.” He dropped her keys back into the pocket of her lab coat. “I’m not going to have a chance to say goodbye to the boys. Abel’s been real nervous about my going anywhere…”

“I’ll talk to him.” She assured him.

“Juice is grabbing our stuff from the house. I’m not going to be able to go back there before I leave.” He reached around to unclip the necklace he wore, then shoved a hand in his pocket to remove the badge he kept there. “Will you hold onto these for me? Or, um, there’s a box on the dresser in my room at the house. You can leave them in there.”

“You don’t want to take them with you?” She stalled on filling the syringe with the morphine he had given her to focus on the keepsakes in his hands.
“I don’t want them to get lost or taken.” They were all he had left of his dad. He would not risk something happening to them while he was away. “If I don’t come back, give them to Piney, he’ll make sure they end up in the right place.”

Piney would take them to Henry Stilinski’s grave, dig a small hole beside the headstone, and bury the items inside of it. If Stiles was no longer around to carry his father’s badge and ring, and they could not be laid to rest with his mother, then their proper place was with his grandfather. If his dad could not be with his wife or son, then he would return to his own father’s side.

“I’ll hold onto them until you get back.” She promised and he knew she would hand the trinkets off like he asked if he did not make it home.

“Thank you.” He slipped the items into her pocket beside her keys.

He did not say ‘I love you,’ it sounded too much like goodbye. He simply placed his lips to her cheek, just as she had done to him moments before. Goodbye’s were formal, messy, and he hated them. A small kiss to the cheek had to say everything he could not before he left.

He pushed his way through the mass of patients until he reached the door. The cold air caused him to take an unconscious step back toward the warmth of the clinic, only for him to meet a solid force. He nearly jumped out of his skin as he whirled around to see whom he had smacked into.

“Scott. Jesus. Sorry.” He apologized, though the alpha really should not have been following so closely. “Didn’t I tell you to go back to the farm? They need your help.”

“You’re going on a run.” Scott eyed the sky dubiously as the rain continued to come down in droves. “It’s not safe in this weather.”

“We don’t have a choice.” And he did not have to explain himself to Scott of all people.

“Let me go with you.” The alpha suggested as if that was an option.

“No.” Even if he was onboard with it, Jax would never even entertain the idea.

“Why not?”

“Run team members have to be approved by the team leader.” Who, in this case, was Juice, since he had seniority. “And you have to be part of the community longer than thirty days.”

“Why the thirty days?”

“Because you need to trust the people you’re out there with. You need to trust that they will have your back.” If you could not trust the people you were out there with, then you were as good as dead. “It takes time to build that kind of trust. Thirty days is the baseline, the minimum requirement.”

“Well, I mean, we’ve known each other almost all our lives.” Scott pointed out like it still meant something. “That has to count for something.”

“No, it doesn’t.” Under different circumstances it might, but not in the current ones.

“You don’t trust me.” The level of hurt in Scott’s voice should have made Stiles feel regretful for being the cause of it, but he felt nothing but apathy.

“Is there any reason I should?” He could rack his brain all day for a reason and come up empty.
“We’ve been friends forever. We’re brothers.” Scott was living in the past. He did not understand that things were not like that anymore. “Is it…is it because of Port Angeles?”

“What else would it be about?” There was no use in beating around the bush about it.

“You said…y-you said you understood.” He said no such thing, not to anyone in the pack anyway.

“I did. I do.” He had an incredibly painful understanding of that day. “You thought I was dead. You knew my dad was gone. It was kinda hard to dispute his death. Scavengers put a bullet in his head right in front of us. And me? I was buried beneath a house that was on fire. It’s not like we ever knew anyone who survived that.”

Except they did know someone who survived that very scenario. Peter had been burned alive, twice, and lived to tell the tale. There was no reason for them to believe Stiles couldn’t as well.

“That’s different.” Scott claimed and, yeah, it always was different when it came to the pack.

“Peter’s a werewolf and you’re-“

“Human.”

“Yeah.” The alpha nodded. “We didn’t think you would have survived. You don’t heal the way we do.”

“I would never have survived my injuries, so why bother trying to rescue me. My dad didn’t heal like you either, but you still sent him to deal with the scavengers.” It was a low blow and they both knew it. “He didn’t matter. We didn’t matter. We were human. Weak. Expendable.”

“No! That’s not true!” Scott argued. “I didn’t tell your dad to go out there. I didn’t!”

“I am the only one who said no, who told him not to go.” He had stood alone, surrounded by people who were supposed to give a damn, and pleaded for his father not to be the one. “You and the rest of your piece of shit pack voted for him to go, because he was the goddamn sheriff. It didn’t matter that he was my dad and the only person I had left. You all sent him out there to be killed.”

“He volunteered to go-“

Of course his father volunteered. He would never willingly put someone else in danger. His dad would always put himself in the line of fire if it would save a life. So, yes, he volunteered, but he wasn’t the only one.

“So did Derek and Chris and me. We all volunteered to go out there and talk to those sons of bitches.” His dad did not have to be the one out there. “You are the one, Scott, who decided that we vote. I was the only one who said no. The rest of you sent my dad out there to die.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I don’t give a shit.” Apologies meant nothing to him, not when it came to his father. “My lack of trust in all of you has nothing to do with you leaving me to burn. It’s what you did to my dad.”

“I’m sorry about your dad, Stiles, I really am. I loved him too.” If that were true, things would have gone a whole lot differently that day in Port Angeles. “And I’m sorry we left you. We thought you died in the collapse. We didn’t know…”

“And I wasn’t worth enough for you to check and be sure.” He was an acceptable loss. He did not
bring enough to the pack to be deemed worth saving.

“Stiles-“

“I waited for you. I waited for you guys to come back.” He must have been delirious from a fever to believe they would return for him. “Even after I buried my dad, I stayed at that stupid house. I waited for my pack to come get me. I waited three days and nobody came.”

“I’m sorry.” Scott kept saying that, and Stiles could tell he was sincere, but it did not make him feel any better. If anything, it made the anger he had long ago buried rush to the surface.

“You didn’t come back.” He felt a little hysterical admitting that now, as if he was finally coming to terms with it himself after all this time. He was finally realizing he had been left behind by the people he loved, abandon like an unwanted pet. “You didn’t come back for me, Scott. I would have gone back for you!”

He would have gone back for any pack member. He would have led a rescue or retrieval mission, brought back an injured party or a body. He would have done it because he cared about them and believed they deserved every chance at survival, or the dignity of a proper burial.

“I know.” Scott sobbed out, tears mixing with raindrops on his cheeks.

Scott knew, the entire goddamn pack knew, because Stiles had done it before. He had been vocal in the discussion they had that weighed the pros and cons of going into a den full of walker-wolves to bring Erica’s body home, or to what constituted as home at the time. The scale was tipped against them, but he, Derek, Isaac, and Boyd had gone in anyway. It had been a risky endeavor but it was worth it to lay a friend to rest.

“I’m sorry, Stiles.”

“Stop saying you’re sorry.” Those words were growing old, repetitive, losing whatever meaning they had left. “Don’t say anything. S-stop talking.”

The universe seemed to be working in Stiles favor when his Jeep pulled up outside the clinic. At least, he thought it was his Jeep. It was a Jeep. Either way, the hasty exit it would allow him to make would prevent he and Scott from saying something one or both of them would regret.

“That is my ride.” He threw an arm out in the direction of the vehicle. “I have to go.”

If Scott had any protests, he kept them to himself as Stiles turned on his heels and strode purposefully to the Jeep. He disregarded the available passenger seat and went around to the driver’s side. He yanked the door open and leveled Juice with an expectant look.

“Scoot over.” There probably should have been a please in there somewhere but his patience was already running thin, and Juice was well aware of his rules about driving.

“Yeah, yeah. You only let other people drive if you are physically unable.” The older man rolled his eyes but switched seats anyway. “Or if it’s Jax driving, but even then you’re twitchy and tense.”

“I was in a horrific car accident when I was eleven.” If had left it a permanent mental scar, that was for damn sure.

“I know.” The club had to deal with him all summer while he was recovering. He was a royal pain the ass the entire time. “We leaving or what?”
“We’re leaving. Oh, and since I’m feeling generous, I am not going to ask you why Roscoe has been given a bad dye job.” His had a feeling Juice was not the culprit behind the Jeeps new look, so he wouldn’t hold it against him.

“I don’t think she looks too bad. It’s an improvement.” The glare Stiles shot the Son was enough to have him rethinking his assessment. “Or not.”

Jax’s team at the wall was forced to take a short break when their hands began to cramp up from the prolonged exposure to the elements. They took shelter in the supply shed that held the CC Teams tools. It didn’t warm them up or shield them from much, but it allowed them to talk to one another without having to yell over the wind or cackling thunder.

“The fence is down. The farm is on fire. Juice and Stiles are gearing up for an emergency supply run.” Jax recapped recent events, feeling the stress of them piled heavily on his shoulders.

“Anything else?”

“I was able to get Margaret on the walkie-talkie for a minute before it cut out. She said the clinic is slammed with people injured in the fire.” Bobby informed him.

“How are they on meds?” They had been well stocked up until now, but they had not had a disaster like this one since before they started letting people in.

“Last inventory looked good. We’ll need to recalculate when things calm down.” Piney noted. “But we haven’t inventoried what the team pulled out of St. Thomas yesterday.”

“So, we might be okay.” Or they might be running dangerously low before the dust settled. “We got anything on Hap and Rat?”

“No, they haven’t come back from the search or checked in.”

“Fuck!” Jax’s bark of frustration echoed off the walls of the shack. “What else could go wrong?”

“You really wanna ask that question?” Piney muttered as he removed a flask from his pocket. “You wanna jinx us?”

“No.” He would not tempt fate with everything else going on. “I need to go look in on my boys in a little while. The storm’s probably scaring the shit out of them.”

“They’re fine with your mama.” The old man thrust the flask into his hands. “We gotta call it quits at some point tonight. It’s only getting colder out here. We all need to eat, sleep, and regroup.”

“I’ll do that when I know things are under control.” He would only toss and turn if he tried to rest anyhow.

“Kids are here.” Bobby announced just as the beam from the headlights of the Jeep flooded into the shed. “You okay with this?”

“Does it matter?”

Jax did his best to ignore the sinking feeling of dread in his stomach as he met the vehicle at the gate. He walked around to the driver’s side to speak with his brother through the window. He was not expecting to be greeted with a glare from the kid.

“There a problem?” His eyes flickered between the pair in the car, hoping to find a reason for his
brother’s poor attitude.

“Why is my Jeep painted black?” Stiles questioned harshly, apparently he was not pleased with the vehicles new color.

“No self-respecting car should be powder blue.” Honestly, he done the kid a favor by having the thing painted.

“Self-respecting…” Stiles rubbed his forehead tiredly. “I shot Miles for putting a bullet hole in my Jeep. What do you think I’m going to do to you?”

“Thank me.” He smirked at the indignant scowl he received in response to that suggestion. “The blue stood out too much. If it was going to be used on runs it needed something a little less conspicuous.”

“Whatever.” ‘Whatever’ translated to ‘you’re right, but fuck if I’m going to admit it’ in Stiles speak. “We will be having a lengthy discussion about this when I get back.”

“Sure.” They had several ‘lengthy discussions’ on the books. Maybe they would get around to them eventually. “Do you have everything?”

“Yes.”

“You double checked?”

“Triple checked.” Juice assured him. “Left the routes on the map in the clubhouse like you said.”

“Good.” They didn’t send out search teams for missing run teams, but they liked having the route on hand anyway. “Where you headed?”

“Sacramento.” That was a dangerous move, but it was safer than hitting up the small towns. The big one had been left for the dead. It lowered the risk of being spotted by scavengers. “If we can’t find anything, we’ll head west, toward the water. We’ll turn around and head home once we reach the coast.”

“You got enough fuel for that?” They had a pretty good reserve in Charming, kept especially for times like this.

“I think so. If we run low, we’ll come back.” They would probably play seek and find for more before they decided to call it quits and come home.

“Ammunition? Food?” He would not let them pass through the gates until he was absolutely sure they had everything they would need to survive out there.

“Jax,” Stiles reached a hand out the window to grasp handful of Jax’s kutte in his fist, just like he did when he was little and was trying to get Jax to listen to him. “We’re good. We have everything. We’ll be fine.”

He really wanted to believe that, but he couldn’t. Something was going to wrong. He could feel the pain of it already radiating through his body, worming it’s way to his core like a warning. Something would happen and he was not going to be there to stop it.

“Jackson,” His brother said his name softly, sensing his anxiety. “We’ve got to go.”

“Yeah.” He could not make them stay, no matter how much he wanted to. “Stay safe. Both of
you.”

“We will.”
The loud roar of the Jeeps engine and the howling of the wind was not enough to drown out the audible squelch of a walker being flattened against the pavement as the vehicles tires ran over it.

“You could have swerved.” He cast a judgmental sideways glance to the driver.

“Yeah. Probably.” Stiles shrugged. “But it’s dark. I can barely see a thing in this fog. I could have swerved and hit something else, something bigger.”

“Fair enough.”

They had long since passed the ‘Thank You for Visiting Charming’ sign. Two hours on the road had offered them a break in the rain and thunder, but the wind was still bearing down on them. The strong gusts pushed relentlessly against the Jeep, causing Stiles to grip the wheel stiffly in an effort to keep it on the road.

“There are a couple small towns between here and Sac.” Juice mentioned as he opened the map they had brought along. “We should stop soon. Find a place to settle in for the night.”

They had been on ‘go’ for nearly twenty-four hours, Juice with his regular hours at the communications tower and then dealing with the biter at the wall. While Stiles had begun clearing St. Thomas at 7:00a.m. and ended up helping Opie attempt to contain the fire. The only reprieve they had was the short time they spent with Abel and Thomas. They were due for a rest.

“We need to be alert when we get to the city.” If they went in while they were tired, they would get sloppy and put themselves in unnecessary danger. “We need to sleep, eat, and regroup.”

“All right.” Stiles agreed. “Just tell me where I’m going.”

They ended up in a little drive-by town just off the highway, about thirty miles north of their actual destination. It was all farmland, save for a small residential area. Stiles had expressed his concern as they took the exit, saying he would prefer a wooded area, but the younger man settled for something out of his comfort zone only because he did not want to waste fuel by going too far out of their way.

“You want to find a house or a barn to catch a few hours sleep in?” Juice questioned, noting several prospects that would provide them with a relatively safe place to rest.

“Barn.” Stiles said as he turned down a dirt road. “Houses have too many rooms, access points, you know, blind spots.”

Some might call Stiles way of thinking paranoid, even in this day and age. Juice called it cautious, and rightfully so. You could never be too careful when you had walkers that wanted to eat your
flesh and scavengers that wanted everything you had roaming around.

“This one looks good.” Stiles claimed as they parked in front of a large barn on a hopefully abandon farm. “We’ll make sure it’s clear, then pull the Jeep in. Sleep in shifts.”

“Yep.”

They were to abide by Stiles ‘no gunfire’ rule during the run. They had a cache of pistols, rifles, and AK’s in their possession, but they needed to preserve the ammunition. Knives would be their primary weapon. The guns would only be used in a dire situation, if they found themselves backed into a corner.

“Two by the barn door, one behind us, and three to the left.” Stiles counted off the number of walkers in the surrounding area. “Any on your side?”

“I’ve got one.” Which had quickly closed in on his side of the vehicle. “I don’t have a clear view of the side of the barn.”

“I don’t either.” Their place in the Jeep did not offer the best vantage point. “Take out that one, then we’ll clear the perimeter.”

“I got it.”

Juice rolled down the passenger window far enough to stick his knife out, jamming it into the skull of the walker who had pressed itself up against the glass. He shoved the car door open, pushing the body away as he climbed out. He kept his eyes peeled for any coming from the side as he went around the back of the Jeep to deal with the one milling about back there, barely able to find it in the darkness.

“Should have grabbed a flashlight.” He muttered to himself, nearly smacking into the walker he was trying to find. “Shit.”

He used the palm of his hand to push against the biters chest, sending it several steps away. He brought up his knife just as it regained its balance and made a move toward him. Juice did not have to put any force behind the jab, the walker did all the work for him, impaling itself on the end of his blade.

“It almost feels like cheating when they walk right into it.” He complained as he freed his knife with a hard yank.

“You conserve energy when they do all the work.” Stiles pointed out. “We’re running a little low on that as it is. The more damage they do to themselves the better.”

Juice rounded the side of the Jeep to meet Stiles on the driver’s side of the car. The younger man had the bodies of three walkers by his feet. The walkers that had previously been idling by the barn door had ambled over at some point. Stiles had a good handle on the one directly in front of him, but did not seem to notice the one coming up beside him, and if he did, he didn’t care. Juice took care of it himself, shoving a blade into the back of its skull before it got within arm's reach of Stiles.

“Lack of energy hasn’t slowed you down.” He commented, eyeing the biters on the dirt floor.

“I could do this in my sleep.” Stiles declared, wiping the blood off his knife and onto his pant-leg. “To be honest, I’m losing my touch. I’ve been off my game.”
“This is what you call off your game?” What the hell did it look like when he was at the top of his game?

“When I was clearing out St. Thomas, I let two walkers get the jump on me. Two.” He shook his head, disappointed with himself. “If I had been that sloppy when I was on the road, I’d be dead right now.”

“You’ve been in captivity for over a year. You’re bound to be a little rusty.” He patted Stiles on the back consolingly. “You need to adjust to being, uh, a….”

“A zombie killing machine?”

“Sure. That works.” It’s not really the way he would have phrased it. “You need time to adjust to being a ‘zombie killing machine’ again.”

“The time it takes me to adjust could get us both killed.” Stiles huffed indignantly.

“Don’t worry. I got your back.” He assured the younger man. “Let’s check this barn out.”

“Yeah. Okay.” Stiles agreed, removing the gun from his thigh holster. “We don’t know how many are in there. The owners could have locked a bunch of biters inside.”

The fear that the barn could be filled to the brim with walkers was not unfounded. In the beginning, people took to locking the infected away before they really understood that there was no cure to that particular ailment. It was not until weeks into the endeavor that people began to put biters down without wondering if they were murdering someone that could be saved.

“Right. Better to be safe than sorry.” Juice removed his own pistol from his waist holster.

“Exactly.” Stiles nodded, handing Juice the small flashlight he kept in his pocket.

Stiles took the door, pulling it open slowly, while Juice aimed his gun and shined his light into the barn entryway. He waved the torch in a figure-eight shape and smacked his hand against the wood of the door to capture the attention of anything that happened to be inside. He gestured for Stiles to follow him in only once he was confident that the front of the barn was void of another presence.

“Slow.” Stiles instructed as they stepped into the building. “It’s not only the dead we need to be wary of.”

“This isn’t my first time.” Juice would not put up with the condescending bullshit Stiles usually reserved for Jax. “I’ve gone out on almost every run since the beginning.”

“I just want you to be extra mindful of your surroundings.” Stiles said placatingly.

“I am.”

“So you know there’s a walker behind you?”

Juice whipped around, fully expecting to see a biter coming at him. Instead, he saw fleshy feet dangling in front of his face. He lifted his faze upward, catching sight of the rope that was almost fused with dead skin wrapped around a walkers neck.

“He hanged himself or was hanged by someone else.” Juice scrunched up his nose in distaste as the biter snapped its jaw uselessly. “I’ll cut him down.”

“Leave him.” Stiles told him, not the least bit perturbed by it.
“It’ll only take a second.” It would not take much to cut the rope from the ceiling rafters and put the walker down. They couldn’t very well sleep with it hanging above their heads.

“His smell will mask ours, will keep the other biters from smelling something that’s alive.” He was not wrong, the dead ones stench was incredibly strong. “It’ll work. Trust me.”

“Oh yeah? Is that another trick you learned on the road?”

“Her name was Amelia. She had locked herself in a lighthouse before she died.” Stiles re-holstered his weapon as he spoke. “I managed to tie her up near the door by the stairwell without getting bit. She kept me safe all winter while I healed.”

“Healed.” Juice’s eyes flickered apprehensively to Stiles chest then down to his hands.

“I wasn’t in the best shape.” The younger man reached a hand up to rub his collarbone unconsciously. “Amelia kept the other walkers away from the door. The lighthouse smelt like her, a pile of dead flesh, so the others passed right by, so long as I didn’t make any noise to attract them.”

“Amelia,” Juice tested the name on his tongue. “You were on a first name basis with a ‘pile of dead flesh’?”

“She still had her wallet on her, her driver’s license. Calling her by her name was easier than saying ‘hey you’ every time I spoke to her.” Juice’s brows rose at the statement, not really understanding why Stiles would be speaking to a walker at all. “I was alone, out of my mind with grief, and delirious from the pain and a fever. I had to talk to someone or I would have lost what was left of my mind.”

“In that case, holding a conversation with a walker was totally sane.” He tried to keep his tone light, but earned a harsh glare from the younger man anyway. “Sorry. I’m not trying to be a dick.”

“It’s okay. You weren’t there. You don’t get it.” Stiles brushed off his apology. “Knowing her name, talking to someone besides my dad’s ghost, it was important at the time.”

“You did what you had to do to survive.” Having someone or something to keep him company so he wouldn’t feel so alone kept Stiles from slipping away, both mentally and physically. “What happened to it- her- Amelia, when you left?”

“I put her down. Buried her by some hydrangeas.” Stiles admitted, his lips twitching up in the barest hint of a smile. “She kept me safe all winter, the least I could do was give her a proper burial.”

“Yeah.” It was a sweet gesture, if not a little misguided.

“You can sleep first.” Stiles swiftly changed the subject. “The hayloft would probably be the best place to rest. What’s the minimum amount of sleep you need?”

“A couple hours.”

“I need you to be more specific.”

“Three hours.” Juice was not too sure about that, but he had made due on less.

“You can have four.” Stiles set the timer on his watch. “There’s a blanket in the Jeep. Let’s pull it in, then you can get some shut eye.”
The number of walkers at the gate had tapered off around dawn. Without an impending threat of one of the walls coming down, Jax felt comfortable sending everyone home for a few hours. He left the normal day-guards on duty at the gate, with a promise that he would be back before long to check on things.

Jax did not let himself go to Gemma’s to look in on his boys, like he wanted to, or go home to sleep, like he really needed to. There were still things that had to be done before he could rest. The situation at the clinic and the farm were his main concerns.

The state of the clinic did not seem any better now than it had earlier in the night. The patients in the waiting area were spilling out into the parking lot. Some looked worse than others. Those flushed with fevers paled in comparison to the ones that had visibly broken bones or bleeding lacerations.

“Hey,” He stopped in front of an older man who had a gash on his forehead. “Come with me. We’ll get you in.”

Jax led the man around the sea of patients and through the clinic doors. He realized his mistake when he saw the crowd of people inside the building was much larger than it had appeared from the outside. He gave the man an apologetic frown as he left him by the door and went to find Tara.

His wife was behind a flimsy curtain, tending to a patient. She looked worn out and haggard. There were dark bags under her eyes and blood smeared across her cheek. The number of bodily fluids on her lab coat made him want to heave up what little he had to eat that day, and he was not that kind of man who had a weak stomach.

“How are you doing?” He was forced to yell over the sound of wind beating against the windows and people speaking in the lobby to make sure she heard him.

“Stupid question.” She sighed tiredly, continuing to stitch a large wound that stretched across the torso of the young woman on the gurney.

“What happened to her?” He asked, watching his wife work methodically.

“Accident at the farm.” Tara didn’t go into detail, not having the time, inclination, or the knowledge.

“Any fatalities?” Part of him didn’t want to know, didn’t want to deal with it, but as the leader of Charming, he had to.

“Three so far.” He did not like that last bit she tacked on, as if she knew there would be more death before the dust settled. “No one from SAMCRO. Two farmhands and a volunteer.”

“I’ll get the names from Margaret and make house calls to their next of kin.” Next of kin was broad term these days. It used to be family, now it meant whomever you survived with. “Do you know if any of our guys were hurt?”

“Honey, I doubt they would come in if they were.” She was right about that. Any club member would fix himself up in the field and keep on going. “I know you’re headed out to the farm next. The last one of Oswald’s farmhands I treated said the fire was just about under control.”
“Good.”

“Are you stopping by the house before you go out there?”

“I wasn’t planning on it.” Although, it was on his way if he needed to detour there. “Why? What do you need?”

“In my pocket,” She lifted her arm so he could access the pocket she was referring to. “Put them in my jewelry box. They’ll be safer there than here.”

“What are they?” He dipped his hand into her lab coat to root around inside. He ignored the keys that held a permanent place there and removed the two foreign objects, startled by what they were. “Why do you have Stiles things?”

“He asked me to hold onto them until he got back.” She was holding something back, he could see that, but he didn’t want to push. “He didn’t lie to me about the run, did he? You did approve that, right?”

“I let him go.” He wouldn’t go as far as to say he approved. “I’ll drop these off before I go to the farm. I was gonna check on the boys after that. Is there anything you want me to tell them?”

“Just that I love them.”

“I’ll tell them.” He assured her. “Hey, what did you do with that baby? He’s not still here, is he?”

“Mary took him home for that night.” Tara told him as she finished the sutures. “She said she’d look after him until things settled down, his parents turned up, or we found a more permanent placement for him. Whichever comes first.”

“Piney’s gonna love that.” The old man and his ex-wife had been like horny teenagers since they rekindled their romance. A kid would most certainly put a cramp in their post-reconciliation lifestyle. “I’m hoping the reason Happy and Rat aren’t back yet is because they found the baby’s parents, and are trying to find a way to get them here.”

“They’ll be back as soon as they can, Jax.” Tara tried to reassure him, sensing his growing worry for the Sons that were still MIA. “Happy’s tough, Rat too. They’ll be fine.”

“Yeah. I know.” He was just having a hard time believing it. “I’m gonna check in on Happy’s mom and aunt today.”

“Make sure to get some sleep at some point.” The concern was heavy in his wife’s tone. “You look like crap.”

“Says the woman who looks ready to collapse from exhaustion.” He wanted to tell her to go home and get a few hours shuteye, but he knew she would not be going anywhere anytime soon. There were too many patients that needed her attention. “Anything I can do to help you out here?”

“Is there another doctor in town that I haven’t met yet?” She questioned hopefully.

“No.”

“Damn.”
Juice tried to ignore the fact that Stiles seemed to sleep better in the hayloft of a barn than he did in a soft bed at home. He was peaceful, relaxed in a way that Juice had not seen him since he returned to Charming. It was a little disconcerting to say the least.

Juice himself had slept fitfully. He tossed and turned throughout his allotted four hours. His issue was not physical discomfort, he had learned to sleep in odd places a long time ago. It was a nagging feeling in the back of his mind that kept him from really resting. He was in a constant state of anxiousness when he closed his eyes, wondering if Stiles was in danger while he was trying to sleep.

He may not have slept well, but he sure as hell woke up with a smile on his face. Opening his eyes to find Stiles between his legs was his favorite way to wake up. Morning blow jobs were the best kind, only made better when they were followed by morning sex. It was not that morning, but Stiles had promised him a rain check through a loud yawn before promptly passing out.

Stiles was currently fast asleep, lying on his stomach, hand tucked beneath the blanket he had folded into a pillow. Past experience told Juice that the hidden hand had a knife locked in its grip that would lash out at the slightest provocation. It made waking Stiles a difficult task.

The alarm clock did a fair job of it at home, but that was not an option while they were on the road. Juice could shove at Stiles shoulder and probably end up with a few bruises or worse for his troubles, considering Stiles woke up violently on a good day. The best way would be to wake him from distance. However, shouting at him was not the best option unless he wanted every walker in the general vicinity banging on the doors. Juice was tempted to return the earlier favor, to wake Stiles up with the feel of his lips on his cock. The only thing that stopped him was the knowledge that he would likely be stabbed before he got Stiles belt unbuckled. He really did not want to be bandaging a wound so early in the day.

He settled for poking Stiles with a stick, because he was a bit of an asshole. After he found one of a decent length on the barn floor, he climbed the ladder to the hayloft. He kept a few feet between he and Stiles, for safety purposes, he would not put it past Stiles to kick out at him. If Stiles had his shoes off, he might use the stick to tickle the soles of his feet. Since that was not an option, he resolved to jab one of his denim covered ass cheeks.

The younger man jerked away at the contact, but his eyes did not pop open and he didn’t thrust his knife out wildly, as Juice had expected him to. Instead, he buried his head further into the makeshift pillow, and growled lowly from his throat. It was kind of adorable.

“Rise and shine.” He poked the stick against Stiles ass once more. “Walkers to kill. Food to find.”

“If you’re going to jab me in the ass first thing in the morning, I would prefer you do it with something a little different.” Stiles mumbled as he flipped onto his back, spreading his legs invitingly.

“I’ll keep that in mind the next time I wake you up.” They didn’t exactly have the time to get into it now. “If you plan to drive, maybe you’ll get something special while we’re on our way.”

“Road head? Handjob? Shoulder massage?” Juice furrowed his brows and chuckled at the last selection. “All three are dangerous while I’m operating heavy machinery, but I’m willing to take the risk if you are.”

“You’ll have to wait to find out which one you get. For now, have some breakfast.” He pulled a protein bar from his pocket and held it out to him.
“Yum.” Stiles drawled with barely concealed disgust lacing his tone, but took the bar anyway. “I thought we could check out the property this morning. See if there’s anything we could use.”

“As long as we’re on our way to Sac by noon.” He did not want to waste any daylight. “I don’t think we should take the Jeep into the city. We should stash it a couple miles out.”

“Take only supplies we can carry.” They had two large camping packs that could carry a substantial amount of food, water, first aid, and ammunition. “Hike into the city. If we find what we’re looking for, we’ll find another running vehicle to haul it back to the Jeep.”

“Exactly.” That way, if they ran into scavengers in Sacramento, they would not be able to take the Jeep or the supplies they had stored in it.

“Well, let’s get this done.” Stiles climbed to his feet. “With any luck, we’ll find what we’re looking for quickly, so we can get back to Charming.”

“It never works out that way.” Especially when they were out looking for food, which was increasingly hard to come by. “We’re gonna be out here at least week to find enough food to get the town through winter.”

“Enough food to get us through winter is not going to fit in my jeep.” Stiles made a good point. “We’ll have to find a trailer or another car, unless we plan to make multiple trips, which ups the risk of being spotted by another group.”

“We’ll worry about that when we find food.” And they would find some. They could not return to Charming empty handed. “Come on.”

They descended the wooden ladder back to ground level. Stiles chewed absently on the protein bar as they gathered what they would need from the Jeep. There was an AK for each of them, their usual pistols with extra clips, and their knives, along with two water bottles and extra breakfast bars.

“I did a sweep of the barn while you were sleeping,” Stiles told him. “Found jackshit.”

“It wouldn’t surprise me if someone had already cleared this place out.” There was no harm in double-checking, if only to see if there was anything left behind. “Maybe they missed something.”

“Maybe.”

They left the Jeep in the barn and set off on foot to scour the property. They exited the barn the same way they entered, cautiously with guns drawn. Juice was blessedly surprised to find only a single biter wandering about outside the door.

“Told you our new friend would keep us safe.” Stiles said in reference to the biter strung up to the rafters in the barn. “Never underestimate the power of a dead guy.”

“Don’t you mean ‘never underestimate the stench of a dead guy?’”

“Yeah. Whatever. Let’s go check out the house.”

The farmhouse was a two-mile trek across a field. They had to be extra careful when walking through the tall overgrown grass and weeds. It would not be hard for a biter, hidden in the brush, to grab at them before they even had a chance to see it.

“You know that scene in the second *Jurassic Park* movie, where the raptors attack InGen’s guys in
a field like this?” Stiles switched out his pistol for the AK strapped on his shoulder. “Let’s hope this ends better for us than it did for them.”

“If you scream like a chick from a horror movie ‘cause one grabs your ankle, I’m telling your brothers about it.” Juice threatened as he to swapped his weaponry.

“That’s fine.” Stiles shrugged. “If you do it, I’ll tell Tig.”

“That’s fair.”

“Now that that’s settled,” Stiles double-checked his gun, ensuring it was loaded and ready to fire. “Eyes open. Ears on. Guns at the ready.”

“Yes sir.” He gave Stiles a mocking salute as they stepped into the field.

Juice kept his gun and line of sight high, above the grass and other plant life. He was to keep his eyes peeled for any walker that were ambling over upright. Stiles had the opposite job. His eyes and weapon were to be aimed at the ground, to keep a lookout for the biters who were crawling in the dirt.

“You know what would make an awesome security measure? A field like this one, full of walkers whose legs have been cut off at the knee.” Stiles contemplated aloud. “Grow the grass up around the walls, except by the gate. If anyone tried to come through at another point, to scale the walls, they would be in for a nasty surprise. It’s like with landmines, but with walkers.”

“That’s, uh, an interesting idea.” Well, interesting might not be the best word, but it was the nicest one Juice could come up with. “Your mind is a terrifying place.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Nothing. Nevermind.”

“Got one.” Stiles announced, bending down to stab a walker in the head.

“Is that a bag next to it?” Juice questioned, noticing an old duffel bag lying discarded on the ground.

“Yeah.” The younger man snatched it up, unzipping it to sift around inside. “We’ve got a canteen.”

“Cante-“ Stiles shoved the item into Juice’s hands. He opened the lid to pour its contents in his palm, receiving nothing but air and dirt. “An empty canteen.”

“And some MRE wrappers.” Stiles muttered, closing the pack to investigate the outside. “There’s a name stenciled on here. USMC Corporal Fran- Oh.”

“What?” Juice handed the canteen back to Stiles and took the pack, reading the name stenciled across the bag. “Corporal Frank Bi…something. The last names too faded out to read. Does that mean anything to you?”

“My dad’s maternal uncle, his mom’s older brother, was named Frank.” Stiles explained. “He and my Grandpa Henry met when they were in the Marines, back in the sixties.”

“This pack looks like it could be from that decade.” It was old, torn in some places. “Doesn’t mean it’s his. Frank’s a popular name.”

“Yeah.” Stiles shook his head, hefting the duffel over his shoulder. “Sorry. My dad had a bag like
this, from when he was in the Marines. My mind tends to wander to him and his life whenever I see anything that remotely resembles something he said or did.”

“It’s okay.” It was natural to find reminders of the people you lost in the most trivial things. “You know that carved angel statue on my bedside table?”

“Yeah.”

“My Grandpa Carlos carved one just like it for my mom after my oldest brother was born.” The one on his table was not the same one his grandfather had made, but it was as close as he could get. “I carved the one at home, after I watched New York City fall on the news. I wanted something to remind me of my mom, of my family. I mean, I have pictures, but…”

“You needed something to help you remember who they were, not what they looked like.” Stiles finished for him, an understanding smile on his face. “So, Grandpa Carlos, is that where Juan Carlos came from?”

“Sort of. Carlos was my mom’s twin brother’s name too, and her middle name was Juanita.” She had named him after herself and her twin brother respectively, and given him his stepfather’s last name.

“So, if you were born a girl, you would have been Juanita Carlita?”

“No, Natasha, it would be Carla not Carlita.” Juanita Carla Ortiz did not string together as well as Juan Carlos Ortiz, so he was thankful to be a born a boy. Given that Stiles name was Mieczysław Nathaniel Thomas Stilinski, he was sure that Stiles was happy about his gender as well, considering the alternative take on his names. “I don’t know the feminine form of Thomas and I ain’t touching Mieczysław with a ten-foot pole.”

“First of all, it would be Natalia not Natasha.” Stiles corrected. “I know that, because I’ve had this conversation with my dad once.”

“Of course you have.” It was a completely normal chat for a father and son to have.

“Secondly, my middle name would not be Thomas, and Mieczysław never would have come into play.” Stiles grumbled. "But it would probably be something equally hard to pronounce."

"Probably.” He chuckled as they began trudging through the field once more.

“Whoa!” Stiles latched onto his arm to keep from falling as the tripped over something protruding from the ground. “What in the hell…?”

“Doors to a cellar.” Juice said as he kicked away grass that had grown on top of the doors. "A root cellar or bomb shelter of some kind. The owners could have been survivalists.”

“Wait. No. I’ve seen this movie. A reclusive farmer, who never hurt anybody, turns out to be a sadist that kidnaps hitchhikers and runaways. He keeps them in his underground bunker, in the middle of bumfuck nowhere, so no one can hear them scream while he does unspeakable things to them.” Stiles jumped away from the doors, as if said farmer would pop out them just to grab him.

“Your mind is terrifying.” Juice repeated his earlier sentiment. “Is that your way of saying you don’t want to go in?”

“I’ll go in.” Stiles shot Juice a look that suggested he was an idiot. “It’s my way of saying that you’re going in first.”
“That's fine.” He had no problem taking one for the team. “But if a psycho farmer gets me, my ghost is going to haunt your ass while my zombieified body tries to eat you.”

“Looking forward to it.” Stiles gave him a good shove toward the doors, ‘cause he was an asshole like that. “I've got your back.”

“Oh yeah.” Juice rolled his eyes. “Words cannot express how safe I feel with you.”

“Blow me.”

“When we get back on the road.” He promised with a wink before returning to the task at hand.

He removed the flashlight from his pocket as he pulled the rusted doors open. He swept the torch down the small set of precarious looking stairs. He stepped on the top one, testing his weight against it, cringing as it creaked and moaned under his feet.

“One at a time.” He told Stiles, not wanting to put more weight on it than necessary. “We don’t want these rickety pieces of shit to collapse and leave us trapped in a potential serial killers former lair.”

“Hey, it could still be his lair. The apocalypse happened, but that does not mean he stopped killing. It just means victims would be a little tougher to come by.” Tougher was putting it mildly. People were spread out more and more, and were heavily armed, attempting to take one without being killed yourself would be a trick in itself. “And he or she would not have cops looking for them.”

“What you’re saying is, I could be walking into a psychopaths den?”

“A sadists den.”

“Sadist, psychopath, what’s the difference?” Juice muttered to himself as he began down the steps.

“Well, one of them-“

“I don’t care!”

He chose to ignore Stiles and focus on the stairs. The way they groaned made him thankful there only half a dozen steps. He made it down without incident, breathing a sigh of relief when he had concrete beneath his boots instead of aged wood.

“Careful coming down.” He instructed the younger man as he inspected the shelter.

The underground bunker was bigger than he expected. The light from the torch did not even reach the end of the long corridor. The width was about twice the size of the ones he had seen in other survival shelters, and had a chainlink fence cordoning off one side. It led credence to Stiles serial killer lair theory.

“Crazy bastard.” He mumbled under his breath.

“I heard that.” Stiles knocked their shoulders together as he joined him on the bunker floor.

“I wasn’t talking about you.” He lied.

“Sure you weren’t.” Stiles huffed disbelievingly. “This place is creepy.”

“I’ve been in crack dens that didn’t skeeve me out as much as this place does.” Course he had been high or jonesing for a fix in those crack dens, so his judgment might have been a little impaired. “If
I see some chick facing the corner and crying, I’m out of here.”

“Agreed.” Stiles nodded. “Let’s, uh, at least have a look around before we puss out.”

“All right.” They owed it to themselves and the people back home to give it a once-over.

There was a line of shelves to the right, just opposite the chainlink that blocked off the left side. They searched through the block of shelves first, an unspoken agreement that they would leave whatever was behind the chainlink for last.

“I’ve got some more MREs.” He told Stiles as he loaded them into his pack. “Should I take them all or leave some in case whoever this place belongs to comes back?”

“Have you seen the layer of dust covering this place?” Stiles ran his fingers through a thick coat of it. “No one’s been here for a while. Take it all.”

“You find anything?”

“That depends, does Gatorade expire?” Stiles questioned, holding up a bottle of the red kind.

“I don’t think so.”

“Then, yes, I found something.” The younger man grinned, putting the few bottles that were left in his bag. “It’s not enough to feed a town, but it’ll feed us for a while if we get into a tight jam.”

“Keep looking.” Juice ordered. “Maybe we’ll find some weaponry or first aid.”

“First aid is likely, but no one leaves weapons just lying around.” Any weaponry that happened to be discarded by someone was usually picked up by another person fairly quickly. “I’m gonna go look down the hall. You keep packing those MREs.”

“Yep.”

All in all, there weren’t many MREs leftover, but more than enough to keep he and Stiles comfortable if they got stuck somewhere with no way home and no way to get to the food they had brought with them. The Gatorades were a nice find, they would need them to stay hydrated if they ran out of water, which would be easy to do if they were going on foot to search for food in Sacramento. Med kits might be a better find, seeing as Stiles only packed a limited amount of first aid supplies for the trip and they were both prone to injuries.

“Juice,” Stiles uncharacteristically shaky voice called out to him. “Come here for a second.”

“What is it?” He asked as he walked in the direction Stiles had gone.

The younger man had backed himself against the chainlink, his flashlight pointed at something on the far wall. There was no fear on the other man’s face, which was a good sign. However, the stone cold anger was worrying.

“What’s wrong?”

“I remember why I stayed away from other people while I was on the road.” Stiles confessed, jerking his flashlight toward the opposite wall.

There was a woman strapped to a table that was pushed against the wall. Her body was naked, rotted, and decaying. The skin of her chest cavity was cut, lying open to reveal her ribcage and internal organs. It looked like a backwoods autopsy gone horribly wrong or a malicious dissection,
“Jesus.” It was a sickening sight, one that made Juice want to gag. “You think she was alive when this happened to her?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t think I want to know.” Stiles shuddered. “We should check her and then keep searching.”

“I’ll do it.” Juice volunteered, making his way over to the body.

Checking a body was simple. It was seeing if the person had been turned or put down yet. When the woman’s bloodshot eyes swiveled up to look at him, he could see it was ‘yes’ on the former and a ‘no’ on the latter. He twisted her head to the side, removed his knife, and punctured her brain via her ear canal.

Killing a walker stopped being a hard thing to do long ago, but once in a while you came across one that made you second-guess yourself. It was knowing that the one-time person had gone through absolute hell just to die bloody. It was that way with Stiles’ Amelia, and with this one, which is why Juice picked up a dirty sheet off the floor and covered the poor woman’s body, a small effort to reclaim some of her dignity.

He turned back to Stiles, prepared to tell him he was done with the creepy bunker, when a flicker of movement caught his eye. It was a blink and you’ll miss it kind of thing just over Stiles shoulder. Juice lifted his gun instinctively, making Stiles raise his brows.

“What?” The younger man asked dumbly just as the thing behind him slammed against the chainlink, rattling the barrier.

Stiles shrieked in surprise, jolting away and knocking into a shelf. It was Juice’s turn to lunge back when the shelf toppled over. Stiles grabbed him by the bicep, pulling him away as the contents of the shelf spilled to the ground, the glass jars it held shattering on impact.

A grotesque, murky colored, liquid spread across the cement floor, beneath their feet. Pieces of intestine, and what looked like brain matter, mixed with the bile. An ungodly scent wafted to their noses. The groans of several walkers smacking against the fence were only drowned out by the sound of footsteps coming from the far end of the corridor, where they had yet to search.

“Yeah, u-um,” Stiles stammered. “I’m gone.”

Juice did not hesitate following close behind as Stiles bolted for the cellar entrance. Safety be damned as they booked it up the stairs. The rotted wood gave under their collective weight as they made it to the top. To their luck, they were on solid grass covered ground before it collapsed entirely.

“I was not hallucinating that, right?” Stiles questioned, scrambling to his feet. “There was someone-“

The footsteps they had heard inside drew closer, more than one set discernible. Juice pulled himself up, grabbing a handful of Stiles shirt to yank him back several feet. It wasn’t until the barking started that he realized how ridiculous they were being.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Juice laughed at their foolishness. “Dogs. They’re just dogs.”

“Holy shit.” Stiles chuckled, clutching his chest. “Are they at least zombie-dogs?”
“Uh,” He leaned over the open doors to get a better look at the two mutts that were barking and hopping up on their hind legs, trying uselessly to get to he and Stiles. “No. Just normal…basset hounds.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“No one needs to find out about that.” Stiles said with a huff. “If they do, those dogs were rabid, zombiefied, pitbulls.”

“Agreed.” The last thing they wanted was the club to know they had run from a couples medium sized dogs like a pair of sissy’s. “I’m ready to head back to the Jeep.”

“We still have some time before we need to be on the road.” Stiles checked his watch to be sure. “Let’s go see if we can find anything in the house.”

“After that freak show?” After being chased by dogs and seeing a chick filleted open on the table, Stiles still wanted to have a look inside a potential serial killers house? “You are out of your fucking mind.”

“Are you just noticing that?”

“We are going back to the car.” Juice had seniority here and he was not afraid to pull rank. “Now.”

“Fine, you big wuss.”

After the stop at the clinic, Jax had taken the time to personally make the notification calls to the family members of the deceased. It took longer than he had anticipated to pay his respects. He felt like hell by the time he was done, and hoped he would never be put in that position again.

He ended up at the diner afterward. It was vacant, closed on account of the storm. He fixed a couple dozen sandwiches, and filled every travel mug in the place with hot coffee for the people stuck out in the rain at the farm. It was all he could think to do before he headed out there.

“Opie,” Jax whistled to capture his brother’s attention as he made his way to him. “What’s the status?”

“Fire’s out.” Opie told him as he took a cup of coffee for himself and led Jax to a workbench. “Barriers up in case another one starts out here. What’s the situation at the gate? The walkie-talkies are still down and I haven’t heard anything.”

“It’s as clear as it’s going to get for now.” There was not much more anyone could do while they were suffering exhaustion and their hands were cramping from the cold. “I sent Bobby and Piney home to sleep for a few hours. Harley and Caitlin are taking a shift at the gate. They said they would take out the walkers they could while they were up there.”

“Happy and Rat?”

“Nothing yet.” He still held out hope for them. He had more faith in Happy, but he knew the Son wouldn’t leave the prospect behind. “Where are Chibs, Tig, and Kozik?”

“Chibs went to help out at the clinic about half an hour ago.” That would lighten Tara’s load.
“Kozik and Tig are helping round up the cattle that got loose in the chaos.”

“Probably not the best placement for Tiggy. Animals better watch their asses.” Jax quipped.

“Yeah, we didn’t really think that one through.” Opie chuckled. “Stiles find you? He ran out of here like a bat out of hell, hours ago. Never came back.”

“He found me.” He set the bag of sandwiches and tray of coffees on the bench to free up his hands. “I sent he and Juice on an emergency food run.”

“You sent Stiles on a run?” Opie scoffed in disbelief.

“All right, maybe he strong armed me.” The kid did not give him much of a choice in the matter. “They’ll be back in a few days or a week, two tops.”

“They’ll be fine.” The bigger man said with conviction. “We call them both kids, but they’re fully grown men and strong as hell.”

“I know.” It did not make him feel any better about them being out there. “When do you plan to call it a night? You need some sleep. You’ve been up over twenty-four hours.”

“So have you.” Opie countered. “And everyone else.”

“I was going to powernap after I checked in on the boys.” He might just crash with the kids at Gemma’s house. “If the fires out, then we need to send everyone home.”

“After the animals are wrangled.”

“Right.” Jax nodded, having already forgotten about the loose cattle. “We’ll assess the damage once everyone has gotten at least five hours of sleep and full meal.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“Jax! Opie!” A female voice shouted out at them.

“Christ. What now?” Jax turned toward the voice, seeing Harley jogging up from the road. “You’re supposed to be at the gate.”

“It’s fine. It’s not unattended.” She paused to catch her breath. “Happy and the prospect are back. They’ve got a group with them.”

“The baby’s parents?” The weight that sat on Jax’s shoulders let up just a bit knowing that Happy and Rat were safely inside the walls.

“I don’t know.” The younger woman shrugged. “The older woman said she lived here in Charming before, but I didn’t stick around to listen. I thought you’d want to know your guys were back.”

“I did. Thank you.” He clapped her on the shoulder in gratitude. “It’s great news.”

“You heading out there?” Opie asked.

“Yeah. You coming?” The other man nodded and Jax looked to Harley again. “Come on, darlin, we’ll give you a lift back to the gate.”

“Thanks.”
Opie signaled for his crew to grab a coffee and a snack before the three of them piled into the pickup. The cab of the truck offered them temporary relief from the rain and wind, but could not give them any real warmth.

“Rat’s watching the gate with Caitlin while I came to find you.” Harley said when they were well on their way. “Happy took the group back to the inn.”

The flooded streets and high-powered gusts of wind had Jax being extra cautious on the streets of Charming. By the time they reached the inn, the coffee Jax had given Opie had already gone cold from the extended trip length. The normally short drive time having doubled in the current weather conditions.

“You can head back to the wall, Harley.” Jax told her as they climbed out of the truck. “Try to stay warm.”

“I’ll try.”

Jax and Opie shook themselves off as they walked into the old Bed & Breakfast. Happy was leaning against the receptions desk, looking like he had gone twelve-rounds with a man twice his size. There was an elderly woman and a man a little older than Jax sitting on the lobby sofa, dirt covered and bloody, shivering from the cold.

“Opie, why don’t you go kick the heater up a notch.” It wouldn’t do much for the folks until they were out of their wet clothes, but it was the best he could for now.

“Yes.” Opie nodded, heading off down the hall and leaving Jax to address the new arrivals.

“How are you guys doing?” He could probably answer that for himself, given the look of them.

“I’m Jax Teller.”

“Jamie Bishop,” The man stood, holding out his hand to greet him. “This is my mother, Blythe.”

“Nice to meet you.” He gave the man’s hand a firm shake, noting how icy it felt. “You showed up at a hell of a time.”

“We were trying to find shelter from the storm when we ran into Happy.” Jamie explained. “When he said he was from Charming, that it was still standing, my mother had to see for herself.”

“Harley mentioned your mother was from Charming originally.” Many Charming natives had found their way home since the dead started walking.

“She moved away over forty years ago.” That was a long time to be away.

“Are you just passing through, waiting for the storm to pass, or are you planning to stay?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Well, we’ve had some trouble recently. A fire. So resources are running low.” He could not very well allow people in to Charming if they didn’t know the facts. “You’re more than welcome to stay, but you need to be aware of that.”

“What kind of resources?”

“Our crops burned up.” And that was all these people needed to know. “You can stay here, in the inn, for a few days while you decide. There’s some food in the kitchen, you’ll have to make it last.
There are clothes in the dressers of the rooms, you can change into them and wash the ones you have. There’s a laundry room down the hall.”

“Thank you.” Jamie relaxed at the knowledge that they would not be thrown out.

“Usually, my mother would be here to help you settle in,” There would also be guards at the door on a normal day, but that wasn’t going to happen either. “We’re a little short staffed with everything going on. I’m afraid you’ll be on your own here.”

“Oh, that’s fine.” The older man assured him.

“Does anyone need immediate medical attention?” Opie asked as he came back into the room, sending a concerned glance to the elderly woman on the couch who had yet to speak.

“No, we’re okay. She’s just very tired. The cold isn’t good for her.” Jamie looked worriedly back at his mother. “She just needs to rest.”

“Oh, well, we’ll get out of your hair. Someone will be by later today to see how you’re doing.”

Stiles parked the Jeep at an old rest stop between a pair of big rigs. He and Juice left on foot shortly after ten in the morning. They stayed on the highway, choosing to take the main road into the city, instead of the dangerous back streets.

“I’m not sure if the highway still being packed full of cars is a good sign or not.” Stiles murmured, taking in the large number of broken down vehicles abandon on the road.

“We’ll have plenty of places to hide if someone else comes down the road.” Juice noted. “Which is the only reason we’re doing this during the day and not at night.”

“I would still be more comfortable at night.” Going under the cover of darkness was the safer option.

“It would be harder to spot walkers in the dark.” The Son argued. “Using a flashlight would alert the dead and the living that we were here.”

“We wouldn’t need a flashlight if the moon was out.” Stiles argued. “We could have the advantage.”

“We’d still have to worry about walkers and people.” Juice reminded him. “Both of which I would rather deal with in the daylight.”

“Is this how you guys usually do it on runs? Only playing seek and find when the sun is out?”

“Yes.”

“No wonder it takes you all so long to get back.” That was hours or wasted time they could have been using. “When I was on the road, I traveled at all hours of the day and night. I could pass right through scavenger camps or groups of walkers and they would never even know I was there.”

“What do you call being taken and held captive by cannibals in Beacon Hills?”

“An anomaly.”
“You’re a liar.”

“Prove it.” He dared the older man.

“How about we just try to get into Sacramento without being killed?” Juice suggested, obviously not up for the challenge. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but there’s a herd of biters a couple miles up ahead, blocking our way.”

“I noticed.” He had spotted them an hour ago. There were a hundred of them, maybe more, it was kinda hard to miss. “It’s not uncommon for them to be built up like that on the main roads.”

“I know that.” Juice came to a standstill so they could decide how they would approach the situation. “Trying to go through a herd that big will either blow through our ammo or get us killed. We’ll have to find a way around.”

“No we won’t.” Finding a route around the walkers could take hours that they didn’t have. “I’ve got an idea. Come on.”

Stiles ducked his head down to peek through the windows of the cars closest to them. He peered into three of them before he found one that held what he was searching for. He jimmied the door open and dropped into the driver’s seat while Juice moved to the passenger side.

“What’s your idea?” The older man asked, closing the door as quietly as possible.

“We are going to grab a passing walker, maybe two, cut them open, and spread their guts all over these,” Stiles reached into the backseat to grab the blankets he had spotted through the window. “We’ll wear them like ponchos. We’ll be able to walk right through the herd. What do you think?”

“You’re out of your fucking mind.” Juice repeated for the third time that day. “And I’m starting to see why Jax doesn’t let you out more.”

“Yeah, me too.”
The storm had begun to clear by the time Jax woke from his nap. The rain let up and the wind died down. The smoke still rising from the burnt out field was flowing into town without the weather to push it away. The breathing hazard didn’t stop Charming citizens from getting on with their usual routines, which had been restricted in previous days. Jax was happy to see everyone out and about as he made his way through town square on his way to the diner.

The establishment was busy, as expected for late in the afternoon. Gemma, Chucky, and Mary were all working to handle the lunch crowd. Jax sent a quick wave to his mother, making a mental note to pull her aside at some point in the day. He received a nod in return before the woman pointed a finger toward a corner booth where Mason and Peter Hale were waiting for him.

“Hey,” He greeted the pair as he pulled up a chair. “Thanks for coming.”

“Did we have a choice?” Peter smirked, sipping his coffee. “What can we do for you, Mr. Teller?”

“Cut the crap, for one.” He was not buying whatever Hale was selling with that Mr. Teller bullshit. “I wanted to talk to you both about work.”

“I’m supposed to start at the clinic today.” Mason reminded him.

“I know, but seeing how busy they are, I don’t think it would be a good time to have Tara and Chibs train anyone.” It would be irresponsible to put more on the staff’s already overflowing workload. “You heard Stiles was out of town?”

“Yes.”

“Scott mentioned it.” Peter stated with a long-suffering sigh. “After he came come crying, because Stiles was mean to him.”

“I heard about that.” Half the patients at the clinic had overheard the disagreement between his little brother and the alpha. Since then the news of the fight had spread all over town. “I’ve heard three different versions of what happened. I don’t know which one is true. I do know that whatever Stiles said, Scott needed to hear.”

“It’s nothing Scott didn’t already know, but it was like a knife to his bleeding heart.” Hale mused offhandedly. “I’ve said all the same things to him while we still thought Stiles was dead. The only reaction I received was one of a wounded puppy.”
“Right, well, anyway,” Jax averted his attention away from the wolf to the kid across from him. “Mason, I was hoping you would take over Stiles duties at the community center until he got back.”

“Yeah, of course.” Mason accepted the task with enthusiasm rather than complaint.

“I’ll handle the police commissioner stuff,” The PC position was still too new, he couldn’t very well hand it off to just anybody. “If you could take care of the Deputy Mayor stuff, that would be great.”

“I’ve got it.” The younger man assured him. “No problem.”

“Thanks.” He expressed his gratitude to the kid before eyeing Hale. “You’ll start at the community center as the Deputy Mayor’s assistant, like you would have if Stiles was here.”

“Fine.” The older man was far too agreeable for someone who just learned he’d be working for a teenager for the foreseeable future.

“You will do what Mason asks you to do.” Jax needed to make that clear, in case the wolf had any ideas about railroading the kid as soon as they were left alone. “Think you can handle that or do you need to be reassigned until Stiles gets home?”

“I can handle it. I’ll be good.” Hale’s word was anything but reassuring.

“Mason, can you give Peter and I a minute?” There were still a few things Jax wanted to discuss with Hale and he would like to do it privately.

“Yeah. I’ll be at the counter.” The teenager stood quickly, scampering off as if he were afraid the pair would brawl right there in the booth.

“What can I do for you, Mr. Teller?” Peter grinned wolfishly.

“What exactly was your relationship with my brother like before?” The question had been weighing on Jax’s mind ever since Stiles told him the elder Hale would be his assistant. “Stiles can barely stand to be in the same room as the pack you came in with, but Opie told me he was downright relaxed with you at the farm. He was joking around and everything.”

“We were mortal enemies then grudging allies.” Peter answered nonchalantly. “To be honest, aside from my niece and nephew, Stiles is the only pack member I like.”

“Why?” The man’s interest in Stiles was odd to say the least.

“He intrigues me.” Peter said coyly. “He’s smart. Ballsy. He was never afraid of me, which was both infuriating and intoxicating. Not once has he shown an ounce of fear in my presence, even when I threatened to sink my teeth into him.”

“You sound like you’re in love with him.” It was an unsettling realization that made Jax want to reach for his gun and tell this guy to keep his paws off his little brother.

“Oh, in another life perhaps.” Peter chuckled, brushing off the insinuation. “We have a respect for each other, although he would never admit it. We can match wits, flirt harmlessly, but that’s all.”

“Harmless is not how I would refer to the pack.” Jax would studiously ignore the ‘flirt’ placed before ‘harmless’ only because he knew his brother would flirt with just about anyone.
“Well, don’t blame me. Stiles and I agreed we were absolved of our crimes against one another.” The wolf acknowledged, looking slightly affronted. “He set me on fire with a Molotov cocktail. I left him in a burning house. We’re even. Blame everyone else for his scars and emotional damage.”

“He set you on fire with a Molotov cocktail?” That really should not surprise him half as much as it did.

“Yes. Yes, he did.” Peter smiled serenely as if it were a happy memory. “I do admire his spirit.”

“Right.” Jax started this conversation looking for answers but only ended up with more questions. “Well, this has been…enlightening.”

“I should hope so.”

“You should finish your breakfast.” Jax nodded to the plate of food on the table in front of the older man. “Then get to work.”

“If you are looking for insight on Stiles and the pack, you could speak to my nephew, Derek.” Peter suggested. “They were friends but always acted as if they were not. Their bond was forged on saving each other’s lives, before the apocalypse.”

“Okay.” Again, that only added questions to the growing list. “If there’s anything else I want to know, I’ll ask Derek. Thanks.”

Jax stood from his chair, putting an end to the talk before the wolf could say anything more. He tried to shake the thoughts of his brother from gathering in his mind as he made his way to the counter. He went around Mason, giving the kid a smile, and joined his mother by the kitchen doors.

“Everything okay?” Gemma asked, handing him a bowl of oatmeal.

“It’s fine.” Things were nowhere near good, but they were not as bad as they could be. “Do you think you can find the time to run to the inn in a little while?”

“Any reason why?” She furrowed her brows. “It’s empty, isn’t it?”

“Happy and Rat brought a group in with them when they came back this morning.” Group might not have been the most appropriate word, seeing as there were only two people in it. “An elderly woman and her son.”

“So, not the baby’s parents.”

“The man could be the baby’s dad.” It was a possibility, he supposed. “I didn’t get the chance to ask earlier. I was too damn tired. I didn’t even debrief Happy and Rat before I crashed.”

“It’s been a long couple days. No one can fault you for being exhausted.” His mother tried to mollify his guilt. “I’ll go by the inn once the rush here dies down.”

“Thanks.” He kissed her cheek.

“I want you to eat all that before you leave.” She gestured to the oatmeal. “I mean it.”

“What makes you think I wouldn’t?” Jax was not one to leave a plate or bowl in the sink without licking it clean first.
“You and Stiles both tend to lose your appetite when you’re stressed.” Gemma pointed out. “You’re worried about the town. You are worried about your brother. Both will be fine.”

“I’m not so sure.” He stirred the spoon through his food absently. “I’ve had this sick feeling in my stomach since Stiles and Juice left.”

“It’s just nerves, baby.”

“It’s more than that.” It was a deep down dread that settled in his stomach. “He’s gonna get hurt or worse. I know it.”

“I’ve known the Stilinski family a long time, sweetheart, long before Stiles and even before Johnny was born.” Gemma had over a decade on John and the Stilinski’s had grown up beside the Madock’s in Charming. “They’re resilient, survivors.”

“I would believe that if Stiles was not the only one left standing.” It was hard to call the Stilinski’s survivors when there was only a single one left in the family line. “All I can see if I look at that family tree is men who died young, while their sons still needed them.”

“That may be true, but not one of them went down without putting up one hell of a fight.” The conviction in his mother’s voice put him at ease, loosened the knot in his stomach, made him believe for a moment that his brother would be all right. “You think I’m full of shit? Go to Piney for a second opinion. He’s seen after three generations of them.”

“All that does is make me realize how old Piney is.” It was tough to remember the old man was well over seventy, that he and JT were just shy of forty when Jax and Opie had been born. “Maybe I’ll go talk to him today, if I can find the time.”

“I told Stiles to do that days ago, to ask about his granddaddy, but he never went.” Her tone suggested she knew Jax would forgo the visit as well. “Speaking of grandfathers, your brother might not be here to have his usual breakfast with Nate this week. It would be nice if you picked up the slack.”

“Fine.” He loved his grandpa, he did, but the old man glowered at Jax whenever he saw him and there was only so much of that he could stand. “At least when he confuses Stiles with someone else, it’s someone he likes. He always thinks I’m Dad and glares at me the entire time.”

“I’m sorry, baby.” She rubbed his back comfortably. “It is the price you pay for being a good grandson.”

“Stiles is the good grandson. I’m the okay one who only visits on holidays.” Jax was a busy person, he didn’t have a lot of time to spend with Nate.

“Be better.” Gemma ordered.

“I’ll try.” That was the best he could do. “Hey, where are the boys?”

“School house. Mary said the teachers are holding some kind of story time to get the kids out of their parent’s hair for a few hours.” That was a good idea, gave them chance to relax or clean up the storm debris around their homes. “Make time to check in on them this afternoon.”

“I’ll add it to my list.”
Stiles insane plan to safely pass through the herd of walkers had miraculously worked. They made it into Sacramento without incident, if you didn’t count biter blood seeping into their clothes. Juice had insisted on finding a place to clean up, grossed out by being covered in walker guts, before they moved on.

They stuck to residential areas at first, although most of them had been burned to the ground. They spent a few hours combing through several different places, finding nothing more than a few canned goods left behind by whoever had scavenged through them previously. They ended up saying ‘fuck it’ and making the trek downtown.

They ignored the grocery stores and mini-marts they saw along the way, knowing those had been picked through and pillaged time and time again. Instead, they searched office buildings, museums, any place that had its own cafeteria to feed the people who had worked there.

“How about we check out the church?” Juice nodded to the untouched cathedral in front of them.

“You want me to go into a church?” Stiles asked incredulously. “My biological mother is the anti-Christ. If I step in there I’ll be struck down by lightning.”

“Oh, come on, you’re grandpa’s a reverend, that’s got to earn you a pass.” Juice rationalized. “Or, at least counter balance the anti-Christ mother thing.”

“I don’t think so. Grandpa Nate was a good Christian reverend but Grandma Rose was the devil incarnate, and their daughter is the anti-Christ.” The odds were still stacked against him. “Not so balanced.”

“Your dad was a cop who saved lives. He and Nate balance the scales with Gemma and Rose.” The Son theorized. “What does it matter anyway? You don’t believe in God. Why do you care what he thinks?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugged. “And how are you so sure that God is a dude? He could just as easily be a woman.”

“What? I don’t- I wasn’t-.” Juice stammered before grunting in frustration. “Stop stalling and get in the damn church.”

“Swearing is a sin.”

“So is fucking another man.” Juice noted. “That doesn’t bother me and doesn’t seem to bother you either.”

“It doesn’t bother me.” Stiles was more than okay with committing that particular sin. “Though we haven’t done that in a while.”

“We never have the time.” They could barely find the time to exchange blowjobs or jerk each other off. “I would promise to bend you over the alter, but church is a sacred place for me.”

“And by that, you mean you’ve fucked somebody in a church before?” Stiles was under no illusion the sacredness of the church had anything to do with it being the House of the Lord.

“Elena Rizzoli. We were in the church choir together. We stayed late after a holiday recital and one thing led to another.” He smiled wistfully at the memory. “We were thirteen. It was all braces and acne, but it was one hell of a first time.”

“Hold on,” Stiles put a hand up to keep Juice from continuing. “You lost your virginity in a
“In a confessional booth.” Juice clarified. “It was all fun and games until Father MacManus found us, my pants down, her skirt up. He told my mom.”

“Oh no.” He could only imagine the embarrassment that came with a priest not only catching them in the act, but telling their parents as well. “What did she do?”

“Aside from making me clean out the confessional and say my Hail Mary’s? She had one of the doctors she worked with at the hospital give me a very graphic talk about STD’s.” Stiles cringed in sympathy, having received a similar talk from Melissa when she caught he and Scott with a dirty magazine freshman year. “Her disappointed looks were the worst.”

“They always are.” Nothing cut deeper than knowing you let your parents down. “Hey, let’s get this done before nostalgia becomes too much for you.”

The conversation came to a halt as Stiles pulled one of the doors open and they stepped into the church. They kept their guns drawn and stood shoulder-to-shoulder as they crossed the entryway to the nave. Unfortunately, the chapel was not as empty as they hoped it would be.

The pews were occupied, bodies filling the seats. The forms were still, unmoving, unlike the walkers they had come across in other buildings. It was new level of creepy.

“It makes sense,” Stiles decided. “It’s been a dull day. Things were bound to pick up eventually.”

“Only you would call walking through a herd of walkers, after taking a side trip to a sadist’s den, a dull day.” Juice muttered in disbelief. “You’re just…”

“Out of my mind, I know.” The Son had said as much multiple times already. “I’m sorry if I don’t quiver in my boots when I’m outside the walls. This shit doesn’t scare me as much as it should.”

“For the record, that is the reason Jax doesn’t want you off the leash.” Juice mentioned. “Your lack of fear scares him.”

“I know that.” He wasn’t an idiot. Jax looked at him the same way his dad did when the world ended and he saw Stiles might actually fit better in the new one. “I do what I can to put Jax at ease, but I cannot act like a scared little boy who needs to hide behind his big brother’s legs. It’s not who I am, who I ever was.”

“No one is asking you to be that kid.” The older man assured him. “Just try to dial down the devil-may-care attitude in front of your brother.”

“Just my brother, huh?” He quirked a brow in Juice’s direction. “Not you? My cavalier attitude toward our brave new world doesn’t frighten you?”

“I’m attracted to it.” Juice admitted with a filthy smirk. “Even if it slips once in a while, like earlier when you shrieked like a school girl ‘cause a walker snuck up on you.”

“Oh, bite me.”

“I already did.” Juice reminded him of the flesh that still stung when the denim of his jeans rubbed against his inner thigh. The love-bite was his reward for keeping the Jeep safely on the road as he came down the older man’s throat while receiving road-head.

“For the record,” Stiles parroted the other man’s earlier words. “This, right here, is why they don’t
want us on runs together. We get distracted.”

“I’m not distracted.” Juice scoffed at the accusation. “We can banter and search.”

“Do we really want to search this place? Do you not see how these guys bit it?” He nodded to the pews full of dead bodies. “Shot execution style.”

“You can’t possibly know that.” Juice called bullshit. “We haven’t gotten close enough to check them over.”

“I can see bullet holes in the back of one’s head, even at this distance. Overkill for a walker.” Especially if you wanted to preserve ammunition. “But let’s investigate to prove me right.”

“Cocky son of a bitch.” Juice murmured under his breath. “Just like your brother.”

Stiles did not dignify that was a response. Okay, not a vocal response, he did flip Juice the bird before turning his focus to the church pews. He used the same finger to signal the older man to take the far left end of the benches, while Stiles took the right. They didn’t walk between the rows, on the off chance there were still some living-dead amongst the dead-dead. They did not want to be caught in a kill box.

Stiles took his time, let his eyes flicker over each body as he passed. They were posed, sitting up, hands bound together with rope, head bowed as if they were in prayer. Two bullet holes in the back of each skull, and a crude cross carved into each forehead. *Ritualistic,* a voice in his mind supplied, sounding suspiciously like his father.

“What are the chances this place is abandon like the bunker from this morning?” Stiles said to himself more than anyone. “Zero.” The other man skimmed two fingers over a spot on a pew and held them up to show Stiles the red dripping from them. “It’s fresh.”

“Fuck.” He straightened up, a new alertness in him. “We bailing or doing a quick sweep?”

“Quick sweep?”

“Are you asking me or telling me?”

“Both.” Oh, yeah, that cleared things up. “I don’t know.”

“Pros and cons,” A threat assessment could go a long way in this situation. “Con, we get killed by a walker or human.”

“Or worse.” Juice tacked on quietly, knowing the kind of evil people were capable of.

“Pro, we find a stash of non-perishables that were donated for some kind of food drive before the infection spread.” He tried not to laugh at how ridiculous that sounded to his own ears. “If we factor in the odds of actually finding something, the cons still outweigh the pros, but we owe it to Charming to at least have a look.”

“How many times have you repeated that ‘owe it to Charming’ thing in your head since we left Charming?”

“In my head? Once. All together? Twice.” Once in his head and once aloud. “So far.”

“Does it help you make the decision to walk into a potentially life-threatening situation?” Juice
questioned thoughtfully. “Does it make it easier?”

“It reminds me that I’m not just passing through, looking for some place to crash for a few hours.” It kept him from reverting back to the person he had been traveling on his own. “It reminds me that I’ve got people to go back to.”

“Do you miss being on the road?”

“Sometimes.” He confessed, tilting his head to the side to give Juice a considering look. “I don’t miss being alone, though.”

“Glad to hear it.” The older man came around the row of benches to cup a warm hand to the back of Stiles neck and pull him into a kiss.

He settled his free hand on Juice’s hip and leaned into the kiss. He lost himself in the feel of the other man’s lips brushing against his. Juice brought a hand up to Stiles chest, gripping a handful of his jacket. His tongue teased the seam of Stiles lips as he pulled away, breaking the kiss as quickly as he started it.

“You were saying something before about distractions.” Juice mumbled, releasing Stiles jacket but allowing his fingers to linger on his chest. “I’m starting to realize you might be right.”

“We’ll have to work on that.” He reasoned breathlessly. “We should probably start now. Get back to the search. Canned goods, right?”

“Yep.” The older man nodded. “Taking the fresh corpse into account, we should probably stick together, for safety.”

“Good idea.” Safety, yeah, that was the reason they were still standing as closely together as they could possibly get. “Where do you think we should look?”

“The rectory.”

“Okay.”

Finding anything was a pipe dream and they both knew it. Food drive or not, the church would have been raided months or years ago. Whoever was leaving dead bodies in the pews surely would’ve taken whatever they found.

Still, they checked the rectory in case they were wrong. It was a small office in the back of the cathedral. There was a nice oak wooden desk and file cabinet pushed off to one wall, a couch on another, a safe on the floor, and a large potted plant on a table by the plate glass window.

“It’s still alive.” The leaves were green and vibrant, the flowers budding beautifully. “Someone’s been watering it.”

“We already know someone’s using this place. The dead bodies out there kind of give it away.” Juice waved a hand in the direction of the nave. “Whoever it is obviously likes plants.”

“And keeping things clean.” The office was immaculately clean. Spotless from top to bottom. “This is your level OCD. If that plant was cannabis I might have a few questions for you.”

“Haha.” The Son rolled his eyes. “No one’s going to leave anything in plain sight. Food’s a hot commodity, it’ll be hidden.”
“You thinking the safe?” It was a small thing, probably used to hold cash from the collection plate.

“No. If there’s anything in here it would be in the desk or file cabinet.” Juice deduced. “I’ve got the desk, you take the cabinet.”

“Got it.”

The cabinet drawers were locked, but it did not take much to force them open with his knife. The top drawer held a few used candles and a matchbook. He pocketed the matches and left the candles where they were, not wanting to waste space in his pack. The second drawer was empty, save for a few jelly beans melted into the interior. He wasn’t all that surprised to find the bottom one full of Holy Bibles, they were in a church after all.

“Hey,” Juice tapped a finger on his shoulder. “Give me your hand.”

“You know that is the one form of PDA I’m not a big fan of.” The closest they got to it was when one of them one wrapped their fingers around the others wrist. “Plus, we can’t get distracted again. Touching each other, no matter how innocently, leads to other things.”

“Just give me your fucking hand.” Juice ordered exasperatingly.

“Fine.” He sighed and thrust his arm out to Juice. The Son grabbed his wrist and pulled, forcing Stiles to face him. He turned Stiles hand palm up and dropped something cold and metallic into it. “What is it?”


“Oh.” He lifted the chain of the necklace to inspect the badge-shaped medal dangling from it, an inscription in the silver reading St. Michael Protect Us. “I’m, uh, I’m not catholic.”

“I know, but I am.” Apparently, in Juice-logic, it still counted if the gift giver was the believer.

“I’m not a police officer.” He cleared his throat around a lump of emotion, suddenly uncomfortable.

“Your dad was.” The older man bit his lip nervously. “I thought since you’re afraid of losing his badge and ring, that you could wear that when you go on runs, like a stand-in or whatever.”

“Oh, that’s, um,” He closed his fist around the necklace and held it close to him. “Thank you.”

“Dumb idea, I guess.” Juice scrubbed a hand over the back of his head self-consciously. “I found it in the desk and I thought…. Sorry. It was stupid.”

“No. No, it’s great.” He tried to reassure the other man. “Except, now I’ll be afraid to lose something you gave me.”

“Lose it and I’ll find you a new one.”

That was difference between his father’s badge and ring and the necklace. His dad’s things were irreplaceable, if he lost them he would lose the only part of his father he had left. If he misplaced the St. Michael’s medal, he would feel awful, but he would still have the person who gave it to him.

“I’m not gonna lose it.” Stiles made a show of securely fastening the necklace around his throat. “See? Safe and sound.”
“Looks good on you.” Juice reached out a hand to flip the charm so it was facing the right direction. “Ready to check another room?”

“Sure.”

He kicked his foot backward to close the bottom file cabinet drawer before following Juice out of the room. They started down the hall only to have the sound of footsteps trail behind them. Stiles tapped his index and middle fingers against Juice’s side, a silent indicator meaning to act natural. He received a brief nod in return that let him know they were on the same page.

“Storage closet.” Juice said as he stopped in front of door labeled Janitorial Supplies.

“Hopefully it’ll be more fruitful than the office.” Stiles did his best to keep his voice even, any sign of strain could give them away.

Juice took the door, putting his back to the stranger. Stiles kept his knife hand trained on the closet as the older man opened it, just like he normally would if there wasn’t another person close by. The door obstructed Stiles view of the intruder, but it also blocked their view of him.

“Just, uh, mops and brooms.” Stiles lied as he eyed the large stack of cans filling the closet. “Nothing useful.”

“Guess you were right. Someone cleared this place already.” Juice grumbled, tightening the grip on his gun. “We should go. Maybe we’ll have better luck across the river.”

“Yeah. Maybe.”

Stiles used the advantage of being behind the door to sheath his knife and replace it with the pistol from his thigh holster. Trying to maneuver the AK into place would attract too much attention, and they had to be conspicuous about this. He took a step back, keeping his handgun parallel with his leg, out of sight. As soon as he was clear, Juice slammed the door closed, and whipped around to face the threat with his weapon aimed high while Stiles leveled his pistol with the silhouetted figure standing at the dark end of the hall.

He and Juice were not ‘shoot first, ask questions later’ kind of men. There was always a moment of hesitation when they were greeted by a stranger. That hesitation cost them more often than not and this time was no different.

There was the briefest pinpoint flash of light before Juice let out a groan of pain and fell to the floor, his body shaking not unlike a seizure. Stiles fired twice, hitting the assailant in the chest, and the man let out a grunt as he dropped. It was only when he was confident the guy would not be getting back up that he crouched down beside Juice.

“Holy shit.” He rolled the older man onto his back to examine his wound. “Are you okay?”

“W-What wa-was…” Juice stammered as his body continued to convulse.

“Taser gun.” Stiles concluded, seeing the two electrode darts stuck in Juice’s shirt near his ribcage.

“F-Fuck.” Juice lifted a hand to grab the conductor wires, ripping them away. “Get me u-up.”

“Come on.” He gripped Juice’s bicep to pull him into a standing position. “Lean on me.”

“N-Non-lethal.” The Son noted as he allowed Stiles to take his weight. “Why?”
“Only one reason I can think of.” And it was not because the bad guy had qualms about killing.

“We want you alive.” A new voice echoed down the corridor. “For now at least.”

Like the man before him, the new guy kept to the shadows, but he was not alone. There were half a dozen figures standing beside him. Stiles and Juice took several instinctual steps away from the threat, trying to put distance between them. It was a futile endeavor they realized when ominous moans of walkers sounded behind them.

“You can try to fight your way out, but if the biters blocking the other end of the hall don’t kill you, we will.” The new man warned, stepping over the body of his fallen comrade. “You come quietly and you’ll have a warm meal and a soft bed to sleep in tonight.”

“At what price?” Stiles was not raised to be a fool, he knew nothing came free.

“Worry about that later. Drop your weapons and come willingly.”

“Fuck you.” Juice spat at their enemy.

“We’ll take our chances.” Stiles growled, shifting on his feet to give he and Juice better balance as they prepared to fight.

“You’re not the first to make that choice.” The man motioned to the walkers at the end of the hall, an odd thing to do considering biters did not take commands.

Stiles and Juice shared a confused look before glancing to where the sound of walkers was coming from. It took all of half a second to see there were no walkers at all, only more men. Stiles did not have even a moment to wonder what the hell was going on before a whir of electricity reached his ears and something pricked the spot between his shoulder blades.

Stiles and Juice both ended up on the floor, their body’s spasming. There were identical cartridges from tasers protruding from Stiles back and Juice's chest. Stiles could see that Juice was out of commission, having been struck twice in less than five minutes. It was up to Stiles to get them out of there or die trying.

He inched his hand over to where his gun way lying a few feet away. He scooped the weapon up as quickly as he could, forcing his body to power through the aftereffects of the shocks. He cursed his twitching limbs as he brought the gun up and emptied what was left in the clip into the group in front of him.

If he hit anyone, he didn’t know. The hallway was too dark and the percussion of the gun going off in a confined space made his ears ring. He could not see a body fall and it was too loud to hear the sickening thud of one hitting the ground.

There was no way for him to reload the pistol, his extra clip was in his pocket, and he couldn’t trust his hands to work efficiently enough to load it in a timely fashion. He dropped the weapon, choosing to reach for the strap of his AK, hoping to get a few shots off and take as many of them down as possible. He dreams were crushed when a foot came down hard on his wrist, pinning it to the carpeted floor.

“Fighting is a valiant choice but pointless effort.” The one who had spoken previously told him. “Now you’re both incapacitated and coming with us anyway.”

“Fuck you.” Stiles hissed, making a grab for his knife on his belt, only to be accosted from behind and have his free arm forced behind his back.
“You know, this would go easier if you cooperate.” The man said as he squatted down next to them, allowing Stiles to see his face. “You’ll sustain less injury if yo- Ah!”

Stiles startled at his outburst, before he saw the cause of it. Juice had regained his bearings at some point, had taken advantage of the enemy’s focus on Stiles. He took the opportunity to remove his own knife and plunge it into the assholes calf.

“Enough!” He stomped his foot like a child, flinching when the movement jostled his wound. “Put them out. Take their weapons. Get them in the van.”

“Oh boy, we’re in trouble now.” Stiles drawled mockingly, earning a derisive snort from Juice.

Gemma had a few concerns about her eldest allowing new people into Charming while things were as chaotic as they were. She didn’t mention them though, because she knew Jax had enough on his mind. Instead, she did as her son had asked and looked in on their guests.

It was later than she liked when she found the time to stop by the inn. By the time she had gotten around to packing up the hot meals she had made for the newcomers, things had slowed down at the diner and Scott McCall had shown up offering to help her out. While initially suspicious, she was not about to say no to a young man willing to carry a box of food half a mile.

“Why doesn’t Jax let you use one of the cars?” Scott asked as they trudged up the road.

“Jax doesn’t let me do anything.” Her son may lead Charming and the Sons but he held no control over her. “If I wanted to use a car, I’d use one. I don’t mind the walk.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“How are you all settling in?” She honestly didn’t care, but one of her duties in Charming was to get a feel for how people were doing.

“Good, I mean, it’s fine. It’s…a lot to take in.” It would be for someone who spent the last few years moving from place to place without a chance to really rest. “It takes some getting used to I guess.”

“Tara said your mom and friend Lydia were doing well at the clinic.” Well, she said Melissa was doing well and Lydia was a pain in the ass. “Opie said you all were a big help with the fire.”

“We did what we could.” He shrugged off her praise. “Hey, can I ask you something?”

“Is it about my son?”

“Um, yeah.” He ducked his head sheepishly. “I haven’t seen much of him, and when I have he’s distant. Angry.”

“Yeah, I heard about your fight at the clinic.” Everyone had heard about the fight at the clinic. “Stiles anger toward you and yours has got nothing to do with his wounds. Opie told me about his little show and tell party at the farm.”

“That was Peter’s idea-“

“Doesn’t matter.” The pack caught a glimpse of the damage they had a hand in inflicting, but it wasn’t the damage that made Stiles who he was now. “Those scars don’t matter to Stiles. It’s what
happened to his daddy that hurt him the most. That is why he’s distant, angry. There’s nothing in the world that you can say or do that’s gonna fix that.”

“I know.”

“If this helpful act is some kind of ploy to get on Stiles good side,” She narrowed her eyes at the wolf as they walked up the driveway to the old B & B. “Then you’re barking up the wrong tree, pup. My opinion doesn’t matter to him.”

“It’s not. I’m not…” He huffed, looking mildly offended. “I just want to help.”

“Right.” She didn’t buy that, but she would let it go for the time being.

She was cautious as they walked into the inn, not entirely sure what they would find. The newcomers had been on their own all day, which was unheard of since they opened the gates to survivors. There was no telling what they could get up to when left to their own devices.

The lobby was empty, no one in sight, and Gemma was not about to play seek and find through the bedrooms. She led Scott to the kitchen so he could put the box down and head back to wherever he was actually supposed to be that day. It was just their luck that the guests they had been looking for were sitting at the table at the far end of the room.

It wasn’t until she gave the pair a long glance did she realize Jax never gave her their names, not that she needed him to. They were recognizable, even after forty years.

“Do me a favor, sweetheart,” She kept her voice low, so only Scott could hear her. “Run and get Piney for me.”

“Uh, sure.” The alpha nodded, setting the box of food on the counter. “Why?”

“Just tell him the wife of one of his oldest friends is here. He’ll want to see her.” That last bit was probably stretching it, but she didn’t want Scott to get the wrong idea. “If he’s not at the school, he’ll be at the clubhouse.”

“Oh. I’ll get him.”

She waited for Scott to skedaddle before sauntering toward the table. The man tensed at her approach, his hand covering his mother’s as Gemma stepped closer. The elderly woman had little reaction to her presence, eyes flickering upward to meet Gemma’s, no recognition in her pale blue orbs.

“Hello,” She smiled courteously, keeping her gaze on the woman. “Jax asked me to look in on you, I’m his mother.”

“Hi.” The man stood from the table to greet her, obviously having been taught manners at some point. He had one up on most of the other men in Charming. “Jamie Bishop.”

“I know who you are.” He might’ve been a toddler the last time she had seen him, but he still had his daddy’s amber eyes. “I’m Gemma Teller, back when you both called Charming home, I was still Gemma Madock.”

“Nathaniel’s daughter- Oh, Reverend Madock, I mean. I’m sorry.” The old woman rambled anxiously.

“He’s retired from the church now, so it’s just Nate.” Gemma corrected. “How are you, Blythe?”
“I—I’m fine. Been better, I suppose, but haven’t we all.” She said tiredly, running a hand through her graying hair. “Your father, he’s alive?”

“He is.” He was no longer the man Blythe remembered but he was very much alive. “Do you mind if I ask where you were heading when Happy and Rat found you?”

“North.” Jamie answered as he sat back down. “To Beacon Hills. We have family there.”

“No, you don’t.” She replied without thinking, letting her mouth get the better of her. “Uh, it’s a dead zone, nothing but walkers and scavengers.”

“We were going to look for…” Blythe trailed off as if she were ashamed to speak the name on the tip of her tongue.

“I know who you’d be looking for.” Gemma was willing to take pity on the woman one time and one time only. “Why’d it take you so long to go searching for him?”

“We were with Uncle Frank. A few of his old Marine buddies had a compound. We’ve been there since the beginning.” Jamie explained. “It was overrun a few weeks back.”

“That’s not really what I meant, darlin.” She wanted to know why it took Blythe so long to seek out the one she left behind. Jamie either had no knowledge of that or didn’t care. “I’m guessing Frankie didn’t make it out. I’m sorry.”

“He’s not the only one we lost.” The younger man twisted the wedding band on his ring finger.

“No, I suppose he’s not.” Gemma reached a comforting hand out to squeeze the widow’s shoulder. “You’re not going to find who you’re looking for.”

“What does that mean?” Tears were already welling in the old woman’s eyes. She knew the answer. A mother always knew.

“It was a scavenger attack. The group he was with came here, let us know.” It didn’t make much sense unless the group he had been with was from Charming as well, but these two didn’t know enough to question her. “I’m sorry, sweetheart.”

“He, um,” Blythe sniffled, tears beginning to coat her cheeks. Gemma hated her for it, knowing the woman had no right to that grief, had lost the right years ago. “He was married, I heard. His wife, is she-“

“She passed years ago.” Piney announced as he shuffled into the kitchen.

“You got here quick.” Gemma was surprised to see him so soon.

“The message you gave Scott made me curious.” Curious enough to drive full speed on partially flooded streets, apparently. “Blythe.”

“Piney.” The old woman grinned sadly as she stood, opening her arms for a hug. “It’s nice to see a familiar face.”

“Yeah, well, older but still familiar.” He embraced her awkwardly, patting her back before stepping away to regard her son. “This is Jamie? He’s grown up.”

“He has.” Blythe agreed, taking her child’s hand in hers.

“Last time I saw you, boy, you were running your big brother in circles in the VA hospital
courtyard.” Piney said fondly. “Your mama was hoping you both would run off some energy before you went up to see your daddy.”

“I don’t remember that.”

“You were about two, maybe three, at the time, so you wouldn’t.” The note of disapproval in Piney’s tone was directed to Blythe, as if he knew she was the reason Jamie had little to no recollection of his life in Charming. “You, uh, were asking about your eldest boy’s wife, Blythe?”

“Oh, I was wondering if she was here.” Blythe rested a hand on the back of her chair to keep herself upright, prepared for another emotional blow. “But you said she passed away.”

“That’s right.” Piney nodded. “About twelve years ago now, I think.”

“Did they have children?” The hope in her voice was a large part of the reason Gemma felt the need to shoot her down.

“No.” Gemma shook her head, giving Piney a look that pleaded with him to play along. “She was pregnant once, but it was a stillborn. They didn’t try again.”

“That’s awful.” She gasped, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth. “I could have sworn someone told me he had a son.”

“Nope.” Piney was quick to back up Gemma’s lie. “No kids. Sorry, doll.”

“No reason to head North anymore.” Jamie remarked emotionlessly, as if his brother’s death meant absolutely nothing to him.

“You’re welcome to stay.” The old man told them and Gemma had never wanted to smack him so badly in her life. “You have a week to decide, although you can leave at any time before or after the week is up.”

“What happens in a week?” Blythe questioned.

“You move out of the inn and into a house. You get a job. You become part of the community.”

“We don’t need a week.” Blythe stood a little taller, wiped the tear tracks from her face, and straightened her clothing, looking less like a frail old woman and more like someone ready to rejoin the world. “We have nowhere else to go. No one else to find.”

“I’ll talk to Jax.” Piney promised. “See about getting you set up sooner rather than later.”

“My old house.” No doubt she was referring to the one she shared with her former husband. “Is it still...”

“It’s taken.” Gemma was fairly certain at least one of the occupants would not be willing to give it up for any reason. “Piney’s daughter-in-law, Lyla, will find you some place real nice.”

“Okay.”

“We’re gonna head out. I brought some warm food to get you through the night.” She gestured to the box on the counter. “Piney and I will go talk to Jax and maybe tomorrow we’ll be able to get into a house.”

“Thank you.”
As far as holding facilities went, the office of an old movie theater was a step up from the
warehouse closet in Beacon Hills. There was even a cot and a bucket to piss in. All in all, not a
terrible place to be dumped in. It was quite possible Stiles just had really low standards.

He and Juice had gotten a hold of themselves by the time they were shoved in there. They were
both up and on guard, pacing around the small room like trapped animals. The guy who had taken
them from the church stood just inside the room, studying them like a doctor observing his test
subjects.

“You don’t recognize me, do you?” The sandy haired man asked, leaning back against the door
that stood between them and freedom. “That’s okay, Stiles, I didn’t recognize you at first either.
There’s better lighting in here, I can actually see you now.”

“So who are you?” There was a distinct disadvantage to having someone know more about you
than you knew about them.

“Theo Raeken.” He grinned widely, as if the name meant a damn thing to anyone. “We use to go to
school together. I moved away after the fourth grade.”

“You expect me to remember someone I haven’t seen since the fourth grade?” He hated to burst
the dudes bubble, but the name was not ringing any bells. “You must not have been that
memorable because I’ve got nothing, man.”

“I’m sure it’ll come to you.” His lack of recognition didn’t faze Theo one bit. “Who’s your
friend?”

“None of your business.” He took a protective stance in front of Juice, restricting Raeken’s view of
him.

“You were always the difficult one.” Theo laughed and clapped his hands together. “So, I’m gonna
go.”

“So soon?” Juice quipped, dropping down to sit on the cot.

“I have other guests to attend to.” If the other man was aware he was handing out information that
could be useful to them later, he didn’t show it.

“Wait.” Stiles stopped him before he could walk out. “Can you give me a time frame of when you
plan to kill us?”

“What?” All the smugness disappeared from Theo’s face at Stiles inquiry.

“Is it going to happen soon or do we have some time?” It might’ve been the control freak in him,
but he would feel better if he had a general idea of when an attempt was going to be made on their
lives.

“Are you seriously asking me that?” Theo scoffed in disbelief.

“It’s a valid question.” Juice commented, sounding almost bored with the proceedings. “You really
should have killed us when you found us.”

“Yeah, that definitely would have been the smarter option.” Stiles agreed, positive that Raeken
would come to regret his decision to hold them against their will.
“We aren’t going to do anything with you until you tell us what we want to know.” Theo divulged as he opened the door just far enough to slip through.

“Oh. All right.” Stiles sent a smirk over his shoulder to Juice. “We’ve got some time.”

“We’ve got some time.” Juice echoed, a matching grin playing on his lips. “You can go now, man. We’ve got it from here.”

If Theo was put off by their blasé attitudes, he did nothing to hide it. He sneered arrogantly as he exited the room, slamming the door behind him. Stiles let out a put upon sigh as he turned to face his cellmate. The Son was kicked back on the makeshift bed, the picture of relaxed, despite the circumstances.

“I can’t believe we were captured again.” Twice in less than two years, that had to be a new record.

“On the upside, this is the most alone time we’ve had in weeks.” Juice pointed out jokingly.

“Oh, that’s true.” If there were guards they were on the other side of the door, and the walkers were outside the building. “It’s just the two of us here.”

“Mhm.” Juice licked his lips and beckoned him over. “We could die tomorrow.”

“We could.” Did they really want to die without using the time they had left to be close to each other? “But we should plan, so we don’t die.”

“We both have knives hidden in the soles of our boots.” The older man stretched out a leg, hooking it around Stiles ankle to reel him in. “We’ll get out of here the same way we got out that warehouse in Beacon Hills.”

“And if they took our knives,” Which was unlikely, seeing as they were tucked away in secret compartments. “We still have our shoe laces and belts. Even one of our shirts can be used to strangle whoever comes to take us.”

“Sounds like we have a plan. All we have to do is wait.” Juice skimmed fingers over Stiles thighs, glancing up at him through his lashes. “What should we do in the mean time?”

“I’m sure there’s something we could do.” He mused, straddling the Sons hips. “I mean, we’re all alone, we have this nice cot here, and we could very well die tomorrow.”

“We better make the most of the time we have left then.”

“Yes. Yes, we should.”

Jax was trying to catch a moment of peace in the chapel when a knock on the doors pulled his gaze from the reaper carving. He was a little taken aback to find Derek in the doorway, looking both out of place and right at home. Jax was not expecting the kid to come find him, and he never had any intention to seek him out as Peter suggested.

“What do you want?” He didn’t mean to be rude, but he was too damn tired to be as polite as others thought he should be.

“My uncle said you wanted to talk to me.” The sour expression the wolf was sporting led Jax to believe he knew he’d been duped.
“I wasn’t planning on it, but while I have you here,” He might as well get some questions answered. “Have a seat.”

“Thanks.” Derek took the seat to Jax’s right, one down from the chair Opie usually occupied.

“Young uncle said you and my little brother were friends.” The way the kid’s eyes rose comically had him wondering if Peter had been misinformed or had intentionally gave him faulty information. “Maybe not?”

“We were, I guess.” Derek shrugged noncommittally. “If you can be friends with someone without really knowing them.”

“I’m assuming what you didn’t know about Stiles was me and this place.” It was natural, he supposed, for Stiles former friends to feel some level of betrayal when they found out he had a family he never spoke of. Unwarranted but natural. “It was for safety purposes. He even used a fake name while he was here so none of the club’s enemies followed him home.”

“Smart.” The wolf said curtly.

“He didn’t tell you about us for the same reason he didn’t tell us about werewolves.” Stiles kept his secrets to protect the people he cared about. “We didn’t find out about the supernatural until an omega attacked while we were putting up the first wall.”

“Was anyone hurt?”

“We lost two people.” An old TM mechanic and a croweater who had been hanging around the clubhouse since before the end of the world. “Stiles put it down before it could hurt anyone else.”

“I wouldn’t tell Scott that.” Derek advised. “He believes everyone can be saved.”

“I’ve heard.” It was a naïve way of thinking. “Is that why Stiles was left behind? Scott wanted to punish him for killing the men responsible for John’s death?”

“Scott’s not vindictive.” You didn’t need to be a supernatural creature to hear the lie in Derek’s voice.

“Didn’t he force you to bite Argent’s dad against your will? Stiles said the only reason Scott didn’t tell you the plan was to prove you weren’t his alpha.” That sounded petty and vindictive to Jax, but perhaps Derek didn’t feel the same way.

“He was an angry kid in a bad situation.” Derek argued, his eyes flashing blue. “He’s grown up since then. He didn’t leave Stiles to die. He wouldn’t do that. None of us would.”

“That’s exactly what you did.” They couldn’t deny something that was a proven fact.

“The roof caved in and we thought…” The wolf’s claws extended as he spoke. “There was no way he could have survived.”

“He did survive. You would have known that if you had gone back to check.”

“We were afraid.” Derek admitted, digging his nails in the wood of the chapel table. “We were afraid of what we might find. He could have been a walker or nothing but ashes. We didn’t want to remember him that way.”

“An honest answer,” He didn’t quite know how he felt about that, but he was glad that someone
finally gave him the truth instead of worthless apologies. “I appreciate that. Thank you.”

“Is that all?” Derek stood, done with the conversation whether Jax was or not.

“Yeah.” He nodded before a final question popped into his head. “Hey, your uncle and my brother, they were never a thing, right?”

“No.” Derek’s face scrunched up in a pained expression, the one you got when you just caught your parents having sex. “Thank you for that imagery though.”

The wolf seemed content to leave before Jax could traumatize him further. As soon as he was out the chapel doors, Gemma and Piney took his place, both wearing matching grim expressions.

“What now?”

“We need to be very careful how we navigate around those people Happy and Rat brought in.” His mother wasted no time getting down to business. “This could end very badly.”

“You think they’re dangerous?” He didn’t pick up any bad vibes from them in the few minutes he had spent at the inn that morning. “The guy maybe, but not the old woman.”

“We aren’t talking about them causing physical harm. It’s the emotional damage we’re worried about.” Piney clarified, leaning heavily against the table. “It’s not Jamie, though, it’s Blythe who will be the problem. Jamie and Stiles are just innocent victims of a decision she made years ago.”

“Stiles?” What the fuck did his baby brother have to do with anything? “Someone tell me what is going on, please.”

“That woman does not find out about Stiles.” There was a threat of violence in Gemma’s tone, one that promised she would take down anyone who dared disobey her. “Stiles does not find out about her.”

“Why?”

“Kid’s got enough on his plate with McCall and his band of mangy mutts.” Piney reasoned thoughtfully, taking Gemma’s side on the matter.

“He doesn’t need that old gash twisting him up inside.” His mother added irately.

“Who the hell is this broad?” She was obviously bad news if she had Gemma and Piney issuing stay-clear warnings. “Why does she have you two spooked?”

“Her name is Blythe Bishop.” Piney stated calmly before pulling the pin on the metaphorical grenade. “Formerly, she was Blythe Stilinski.”

“She’s John’s mother.” Gemma spat the words out like a curse. “She’s Stiles grandmother.”

“Fuck.”
They took his shoes and socks, leaving his feet bare on the unforgiving cold cement floor. His toes had gone numb from it long ago, his calves following quickly. He had lost the feeling in his ass too, but that had more to do with the uncomfortable metal chair than it did with the chill.

“You can go back to that office with the cozy cot and warm blanket, if you just tell me what I want to know.” Theo’s voice sound like nails on the chalkboard the longer Stiles had to listen to it.

“Where is your camp?”

“I don’t have one.” It was the same answer he had given the first time Theo had asked and every time since then.

“I’ve got to hand it to you, Stiles,” He cringed at the aura of familiarity in Raeken’s voice, as if they were friends. “You and your boyfriend have lasted much longer then I thought you would.”

“And how long is that?” It was hard to tell when it was night or day. Theo came in at random intervals. There were no windows to see the sun come up, and the only source of light was coming from a flickering bulb dangling from the ceiling.

“Three days, give or take a few hours.” Three days for Theo felt a hell of a lot longer to Stiles. He wondered if it was the near constant darkness, the pain radiating from his hands and face, or the aching loneliness causing time to slow.

The only human contact he had since that first night had been Theo. They had separated he and Juice the following morning, after disarming them of the knives they kept tucked away in their boots. They were dragged off to different rooms in a dank and dreary basement that smelt like burnt popcorn. That was the last Stiles saw of Juice.

“Where is your camp?”

“I don’t have one.”

“Liar.” The other man growled, ripping the scalpel from its place between the skin and nail of Stiles index finger.

The longer Stiles held out the angrier Theo became, the sloppier he got. He lost the precision of his technique the longer he kept at it. The slow and agonizing method was replaced by the less effective quick and bloody. If you wanted information, you took your time. He thought Theo had known that when he brought out the scalpel.

He had run it across the skin of Stiles wrist to the palm of his hand. The barely-there pressure was enough to hurt but not open his veins. It was when Theo reached his fingertips that the real pain
Theo had tapped each of them with the medical instrument with a curious expression on his face, as if he was deciding which finger was acceptable for what he had in mind. He chose the pinkie to go first. He had gripped it tightly and worked the scalpel under Stiles nail bit-by-bit.

That was how Theo had chosen to begin his torment, and it had all gone downhill from there. He kept to Stiles hands for the most part, breaking three fingers on his left hand and tearing the nails entirely off the fingers of his right. Stiles had half-expected Theo to move onto his toes next, but he kept on with his fingers, moving the scalpel from one to another on his left hand whenever he felt like it.

That wasn’t to say that that Theo shied away from a good beating. Stiles had some bruised ribs and a nice shiner, but those were mainly from the fight he put up while Theo and his goons were tying his wrists to the damn chair. To his own credit, he had gotten a few shots in himself, Raeken had a busted lip as proof.

“Where is your camp?” His abuser repeated the same question he had been asking since Stiles had gotten there.

“I don’t have a camp.” Stiles was beginning to sound like a broken record to his own ears. “Why is that so hard for you to understand?”

“You’re well fed and fairly clean. Your clothing is worn but not ripped.” Theo extended a hand to smooth the wrinkles on Stiles shirt. “You’ve got a nice set up somewhere. I want to know where it is.”

“And I told you that I don’t have a camp.” Technically, he wasn’t lying. Charming was the furthest you could get from a camp.

“Do I need to start pulling teeth?”

“You could, but I wouldn’t recommend it.” He really hoped Theo chose a different form of torture, because Stiles would not have access to a dentist when all this was over. “A sore jaw is gonna be detrimental to your search for answers.”

“We’ll see.” Theo reached over to the tray of tools beside him, picking up a pair of pliers. “Now, say—”

“Don’t tell me to ‘open up and say ah.’” He could handle torture, but clichés were unnecessary. “Don’t be that guy. Just do what you gotta do and shut the fuck up about it.”

A few calm days had been good for Charming. Things had finally begun to return to normal, the townspeople getting back to their usual routines. Those who had been kept busy during the fire had a chance to rest. And the club the was finally able to come together, nearly as a whole, at the table for the first time in a week.

“Where do we want to start?” Jax opened the table to whoever wanted to speak first. “The farm?”

“Oswald’s drawing up blueprints for a new barn and some horse stalls.” Tig disclosed, leaning back in his chair. “The build team can get started after we finish the clean up.”
“Do we have all the materials for it?” He didn’t want to start construction without all the necessary equipment. “Or do we have to send out another team for a supply run?”

“Oswald thinks we’ve got it covered with the stuff they pulled off that housing development in Marysville.” Tig slid the list of construction supplies they had in storage over to Jax. “No run needed.”

“Good.” The last thing he wanted to do was send out a team while they still had one unaccounted for. “Hap, did you and Rat find anything on the baby’s parents while you were out?”

“Found a backpack full of baby formula about two miles from the Mazda.” Happy informed him.

“There was blood all over it.” Rat scrunched up his face in disgust as he spoke. “They must’ve been on their way back to the car when they were attacked.”

“So, it’s safe to say the baby’s orphaned now.” He was a parentless child who now needed a permanent home. “Piney, are you and Mary okay with him for a little while longer? Tara’s got a plan to place him, but it’s going to take some time to work out.”

“We’ll take care of him.” The older man assured him. “Can I get the table for a minute?”

“Yes.”

“Do not mention the name Stilinski in front of the Bishop’s. They’re those new folks Hap brought in.” The dark undertones in Piney’s voice had the Son’s tensing in fear. “They ask if you knew Chief Stilinski, answer honestly. You leave Johnny and the boy out of it.”

“Why?” Kozik asked nosily.

“’Cause I fucking said so.” The elder Winston shot a glare to the Son questioning him.

“It’s important guys. The less they know about Stiles and John the better.” Jax didn’t know the full story about the former Mrs. Stilinski, but he was trusting Piney and Gemma’s judgment on the matter. “Speaking of the kid, anyone know if Sergio’s heard from Stiles or Juice on the radio?”

“I talked to Precious this morning. Sergio’s got nothing but static on the radios.” Bobby sighed tiredly. “You know the chance of that old CB working is shoddy at best.”

“I know.” The thing was an ancient piece of shit they had scrapped out of an old eighteen-wheeler. “Anything else?”

“I’m meeting with the ladies from the General Store and Oswald to go over the current food situation.” Piney told him. “See where we’re at and how much we need to ration, so it’ll last until the boys get back.”

“Okay.” They hadn’t rationed it out yet, but it would be the smart thing to do. “Let me know how it goes.”

“Looks like the storm is gone for good.” Opie glanced at the sunlight shining through the window behind Jax. “It’s time to get that chainlink back up.”

“You’re gonna need a few bodies for that.” Unfortunately, most were still doing clean up or getting caught up on work they had missed during the storm and fire. “You got a crew in mind?”

“You and me.” Opie smirked as Jax bit back a groan of frustration at one more thing being added
to his plate. “A little manual labor’s not gonna kill you, Pres.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Truthfully, the labor sounded better than all the meetings he had around town. “If it’s just you and me, we’ll be out there all day. Anyone else on your list?”

“The pack.”

“No.”

“Hear me out.” Opie held up a hand to prevent Jax from protesting. “They’re quick, efficient, and strong. We’ll get the fence back up in half the time.”

“I still don’t trust them.”

“This isn’t about trust, Jax. It’s about getting the job done.” Opie argued. “If they’re going to stay here, we’re all going to have to learn to coexist, peacefully.”

“Being immature and passive aggressive is only going to make things unnecessarily difficult.” Chibs made a good point, though Jax would never admit it. “Holding a grudge ain’t gonna get us anywhere. Stiles was the victim. It’s his anger to carry, not ours.”

“So we just let it go?” He wasn’t sure if that was something he could do. “It’s not that easy.”

“No one is asking you to forgive them. I don’t think any of us plan to.” Opie tried again to convince Jax to keep his cool around the pack.

“Let’s be real here, the most their guilty of is being pussies.” Tig joked, a half-hearted attempt to break the tension. “Think about it that way.”

“You got anything to add to this?” Jax looked to Piney, hoping to find support.

“If Gemma and I can play nice with the Bishop’s, you can do the same with McCall and his friends.” The old man took the same stance as the other Sons, the traitor. “Suck it up, kid.”

“I’ll try.”

The metallic taste of blood mixed with salvia filled his mouth making him gag. He turned his head as far as he was able to spit a wad to the floor, feeling the spit dribble down his chin. He pulled at the bindings on his wrists uselessly, trying and failing to reach a hand up to wipe the drool away.

“Let me get that for you,” His greasy haired captor swept a dirty rag beneath his chin. “There we go, Pretty.”

He flinched involuntarily at the moniker. It unsettled something inside of him, left him feeling dirty. It made him want to hock a loogie of blood into the man’s face, although he learned from prior experience doing that would only earn him a shot to the ribs, courtesy of a henchman who used a broom handle as his weapon of choice.

“You wouldn’t react that way to your own name. Just tell me your name and I’ll use it.” The leader caressed Juice’s cheek with his thumb. “It’s only fair, I told you mine.”

The leader’s name was Tully. He had introduced himself while his men had busied themselves tying Juice to a chair when he had first been brought in.
“Come on, Pretty, tell me your name.” Tully urged, remaining calm and composed, speaking softly as if he were trying to gain Juice’s trust. “Tell me where your camp is. Tell me how many people are in your group.”

“No camp. It’s just me and the kid.” He ignored the constantly repeated request for his name. Names held power and he was not willingly to hand that over to this guy.

“Again.” Tully ordered the man beside him before the henchman used the broom to deliver three hard blows to Juice’s torso.

That was Tully’s game. He never physically harmed Juice himself. He let the brute who stood next to him dole out the punishment. Tully kept his hands clean.

“Defiance will only make this worse for you.” Tully drawled languidly. “Although, I do enjoy a challenge.”

“Beating someone while they’re strapped to a chair isn’t what I would call a challenge.” Juice pulled at his bindings to accentuate his point. “It’s a bitch move.”

“I would untie you, but I doubt you would be able to walk, let alone defend yourself.” Tully nudged Juice’s right foot with his own, causing him to cry out in pain. “See? You wouldn’t even be able to stand on that mangled thing.”

Mangled was a good word for it, proper considering its current state. He was sure there were several broken bones in it, courtesy of a hammer being brought down onto it multiple times. It had been Tully’s way of keeping him still after he had shot out his leg to bring Tully’s guard to his knees. The guy didn’t appreciate the nut-shot, but in Juice’s defense, there was a limit to which height he could reach while stuck in a chair.

“Boss,” Another man, sporting AB ink similar to Tully’s, popped his head in through the door. “We’ve got two more. One for you and one for Raeken.”

“Send mine in.” Tully instructed, never taking his eyes off Juice. “Pretty, we’re going to have to try something different now that my attention’s going to be divided.”

Juice shuddered at what that might mean while the door was pushed open. Two men half-carried/half dragged an African American female into the room. She was pissed, fighting them every step of the way.

“The guy she was with called her Braeden.” The guard told Tully as he forced the woman into the chair beside Juice. “There’s a gnarly scar on her neck, but the rest of her is pristine.”

“She’ll do fine.” Tully didn’t even spare the girl a glance as he spoke. “As for Pretty here, I think we will need the torch.”

“Where?” The guard questioned, picking up a small blowtorch from the tray sitting off to the side.

“Well, there’s a specific type of damage done to his chest and foot.” That damage was pure brute force, bruising and broken bones, nothing like Tully was thinking now. "Let’s start somewhere new. Right here.”

Tully skimmed his nails over the reaper inked on Juice’s forearm. He jerked away instinctively, panic rising in his chest. The idea of losing the tat that linked him to SAMCRO was far worse than the pain that was surely coming. He shut his eyes, inhaled deeply, feeling the heat of the flame lick his skin.
“Consider this a cleansing, Pretty.” Tully leaned in closely to whisper huskily into his ear. “Burning away your demons.”

The clinic was closed for anything but emergencies, a last ditch effort to clear the place, if only for a few hours. It gave Tara the opportunity to clean it up a bit and check on the supplies. She didn’t expect anyone to join her, she was surprised and a little wary when she heard the bell on the front door ring.

“Hello?” Melissa’s voice boomed through the small clinic.

“Back here!” She shouted from the medicine locker.

She jotted down numbers next to the different types of medication the locker held. Seeing the numbers so low was disheartening, some not even reaching double digits. They hadn’t been that low on clinic supplies since they had first returned to Charming.

“Hey,” The nurse smiled warmly as she rounded the corner to the storage area. “Need some help?”

“Sure.” There was plenty of work to go around. “You look good. Did you get some rest on your day off?”

“Yes.” The older woman nodded enthusiastically. “The kids made sure to keep quiet so I could sleep as long as I wanted. How about you?”

“I think I slept a full twenty-four hours.” If Jax or the boys had tried to wake her at any point, it didn’t work. “Woke up this morning and thought I’d better get a head start on the inventory.”

“How’s that going?”

“Terrible.” She frowned, looking down at the clipboard in her hands. “We’re good on antibiotic and aspirin for the time being. It’s the anesthetic that we’ve used up.”

“How low are we?” Melissa poked her head into the locker to take a peek at what they had left.

“We’re down to general anesthetic and we’re going to have to seriously ration it out.” They would be fine as long as no one was seriously injured.

“Where did you get all of the meds before?”

“Evacuation centers and old clinics.” Any place they could find really. “I know we can get some out of St. Thomas.”

“That’s what Scott and the others were doing before the storm.” Melissa reminded her. “They brought some meds back, didn’t they?”

“We used the majority of it already.” Hindsight, they should have been smarter about giving out meds when they were slammed with patients from the storm and fire. “I’ll have to tell Jax we need to send a small team in. Or, we can go in ourselves.”

“He would be okay with that?”

“Absolutely not.” He would look at her like she had lost her goddamn mind. “But sometimes it’s better to beg forgiveness than ask permission.”
“You want to do it today?” Having Melissa so readily onboard with the plan made Tara grin.

“Maybe not today.” Things were only beginning to settle. They needed a few more days of peace before stirring up a minimal amount of trouble with an unsanctioned mission. “We should give it a couple more days, unless something happens that requires that medication.”

“Oh okay.”

“For now, I’m going to finish the rest of this inventory.” She gestured to the medicine locker. “Do you mind checking the rest of our stock? Bandages, syringe’s, stuff like that.”

“I’ve got it.”

“Thank you.”

Having a day off was good for everyone. They all needed the time to relax and rest, or just hang out with one another. There was something serene about having a good portion of his pack all gathered together.

Kira and Malia were practicing with Kira’s sword off near the dining room, why they were doing it in the house, Scott didn’t know, but he wasn’t about to question them. Lydia was stretched out on the loveseat, a pile of books on the coffee table in front of her. Liam, Isaac, Derek, Cora, and Scott were sitting cross-legged on the floor, playing a game of cards. Peter had claimed the couch for himself, draping himself across it like a sunbathing cat.

“It’s so nice to have access to a library again.” Lydia gushed, holding a book she recently checked out close to her chest. “And the girls who work there, Caitlin and Emily, they’re from Beacon Hills.”

“I’ve seen them around town.” Scott had caught a glimpse of the other Beacon Hills natives out with Harley. “We should ask them to come over.”

“Maybe on a day when all of us are here.” The redhead acknowledged the lack of certain pack members being present, mainly the parents of the group.

“Where is everyone?” The alpha inquired, disappointed that some of them were missing. “Kira, where’s your dad?”

“He and Natalie are at the school, doing lesson plans and stuff for the kids.” The kitsune told him, thrusting her sword toward Malia who jumped back before it could make contact.

“I thought we were all staying in today.” It was what they had agreed to at dinner the night before. “Even my mom went into work.”

“Mason went in too.” Liam pouted. “Some new people came into town the other day and he’s gotta do their intake.”

“Danny’s got a shift at the communications tower. Allison and Chris are out back doing some hunter training.” Cora explained before sending her uncle a questioning glance. “If Mason’s at work, why aren’t you? Aren’t you supposed to be his assistant?”

“He said he didn’t want to put up with me today.” Peter huffed, flipping through the pages of an
old architecture magazine.

“We’ve all been there.” Derek grumbled under his breath.

“Careful, nephew.” Peter warned just as a knock sounded on the front door. “Oh, visitors.”

“Come in!” Lydia yelled, rather than waiting for anyone to get up to answer it.

“Hey,” Opie nodded in greeting, standing in the open doorway. “Enjoying your day off?”

“Why? You here to ruin it?” The elder Hale snarked with a playful smile.

“For some of you.” The surly Son replied honestly. “Jax and I could use some help getting the chainlink back up. Can some of you give us a hand?”

“Of course.” Scott dropped his cards and stood up from the floor, ready to go. “How many of us do you need?”

“Whoever’s willing to go.”

“I’ll help. Derek and Cora too.” Peter volunteered the entirety of his family. “Anything is better than this.”

“Fine.” Derek agreed.

“I’ll go too.” Isaac offered.

“When do you need us?”

“Now.”

Apparently, Stiles had a cellmate now. He was an older Hispanic guy with a scar running down his chest, similar to the one Gemma had. The guards had bound him to the chair beside Stiles and left them alone. Theo had gone as well, only after ensuring they were both securely strapped down.

“So,” Stiles lolled his head to the side to eye the newcomer. “Where’d they pick you up?”

“What?”

“They found me at a church.” He had plans to use that to prove his child of the anti-Christ theory to Juice later on. “Where’d they get you?”

“The convention center. I went to get some supplies I had stashed there.” The older man admitted. “I guess they found them first.”

“Guess so.” They must have eyes all over town, or at least for a few city blocks. “I’m Stiles, by the way.”

“Nero.” The man attempted a small wave with a bound hand, which was not pinned down by rope as Stiles had previously suspected. “It’s, uh, it’s nice to meet you?”

“They used handcuffs.” Where Stiles had rope biting into the skin of his wrists, Nero had cuffs attaching him to the arms of the chair. “Why would they do that?”
“Maybe they’re out of rope?” Nero guessed. “Or they’re planning to move me again soon and don’t want to deal with all those knots.”

“Or they don’t see you as much of a threat.” The guy was about Gemma’s age, Theo and his goons probably assumed he didn’t have much fight in him. “This is good.”

“Good?”

“Fucking fantastic.” It was the best thing that happened all day. His luck was finally turning around. “I know how to get us out of here.”

“I’m not gonna like this, am I?” The expression on Nero’s face suggested he had an idea of what Stiles had in mind.

“Can you move your chair?” Nero’s uninjured state would make it easier for him to move than it would be for Stiles. “Turn it until one of your arms is angled with one of my feet.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m gonna kick your hand, repeatedly, to dislocate your thumb so you can slip the cuffs.” It wasn’t going to be a pleasant experience for either of them. “It’ll work. I saw it in a movie once.”

“Well, with that kind of logic backing this,” Nero shook his head. “What could go wrong?”

“It’s worth a shot, man, unless you’re looking forward to pain and agony,” Stiles wiggled his mutilated fingers to show Nero what was in store for him if they stayed.

“All right.”

Nero did the best he could to maneuver the chair into the place. It was a gut wrenching situation. Every scrape of the chair leg against the cement had their eyes darting to the door, waiting on baited breath for someone to come in. It was a goddamn miracle they weren’t caught in the act.

Stiles didn’t give Nero a chance to puss out. The moment the chair was at the right angle, he lifted his leg, pulling it back as far as he could manage, and slammed it into the other man’s fingers. His bare heel hitting the metal cuffs hurt like a motherfucker, but he didn’t let it deter him. He brought his leg back again and again until Nero finally called out their success.

“Enough! Enough!” The older man grunted, slipping his hand through the cuffs with minimal effort.

“Now, put your thumb back into place and dislocate the other one to get that hand free.” Stiles ordered, feeling freedom at his fingertips.

Nero did as he instructed and without complaint. Once he had both hands free, he wasted no time in untying Stiles wrists. It took some skill, giving the complicated knot work, but he got there eventually.

“Thank you.” He expressed his gratitude to the man as he struggled to stand. “I’m not sure about you, but I was brought in with a friend and I’m not going anywhere without him.”

“I wasn’t alone when they brought me in either.” Nero confessed, putting them both on the same page. “So what’s the plan?”

“You’re in better shape than I am, so you’re gonna have to be on the attack.” Something told him
the older man wouldn’t be half-bad in a brawl. “We’re gonna get one of the guards to come in here, to unlock the door. I’ll antagonize him and you attack him from behind.”

“What happens after that? What happens when we catch the attention of the other guards?” Nero asked a great question, it was too bad he wouldn’t care for Stiles answer.

“React in the moment.”

“Perfect.” Nero scrubbed a hand down his face. “The door opens inward. I’ll stand behind it.”

“Let’s do this.” Stiles steeled himself as he made his way to the door. He closed his hand into a fist, prepared to slam it against the metal, only to realize his painful mistake when his brutalized fingers made contact with his palm. “Fuck.”

“I’ll, uh, do the knocking.” Nero patted Stiles shoulder comfortingly. “You do the yelling.”

“Yeah. Okay.”

Nero pounded viciously on the door. The loud banging echoing off the walls.

“Hey!” Stiles screamed between knocks. “Open this fucking door! Let us the hell out of here!”

“Think they heard that?”

Whatever response Stiles had was lost when the door was thrown open and an unfamiliar guard was in his face. The nose-to-nose thing was an intimidation tactic that did nothing for him. He had played that game with Derek so many times it had lost its substance.

“How did you get untied?”

“Funniest thing, they came undone all on their own.”

The quip was weak by his standards but it didn’t matter when in the next moment Nero was barreling into the guy, shoving him roughly into the wall. The man shot his arm back to push Nero off him unsuccessfully. Nero grabbed him by the scruff and banged his head face-first into the wall, rendering him unconscious.

“Good job. Gold star.” Stiles offered Nero a jaunty thumbs up. “Search him for weapons.”

“Yep.” The older man crouched down to rifle through the henchman’s pockets, finding nothing but a knife. “That’s it.”

“He’s a glorified babysitter. He doesn’t need more than that.” A gun was too bulky and easy to disarm. A knife was slim enough to conceal. “He doesn’t have any keys?”

“No keys.”

“One of the other guards must have a set.” They would need them to get into the room they had Juice and Nero’s friend locked in. “Come on.”

Stiles stuck his head out the doorway, spying the guards at the other end of the hallway, chatting idly away with one another. He held up three fingers for Nero, alerting him to the number of men they would have to go through to get to their friends. He then pointed to the knife in Nero’s hands, holding up two fingers.

“Two of them have knives.” The older man translated in a hushed tone. “What does the other one
have? A gun?"

“A stick thing.” It was a long wooden pole that looked kind of like a broom without the bristles attached to the end. “Oh! It’s a jo staff or maybe a bo staff. Cool. Let’s hope the guy just found it and doesn’t know how to use it.”

“It’s a stick. Swing and hit, pretty self-explanatory.” Nero there was a heavy note of exasperation in his voice, as if Stiles were a special brand of idiot he had to put up with.

“Jo and bo staffs are used in Japanese martial arts.” They could be very dangerous when used properly.

“Why do you know that?”

“I have interests.” Stiles waved off the question. “Are you ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.”

Nero exited the room first, holding the knife closely to his side. Stiles waited a beat before following. He hoped, if they were quiet, they could make it down the hall without being noticed until the last possible moment. Of course, what little luck they acquired had to run out at some point.

The man with the wooden staff spotted them first. The burly man snarled in their direction before his blade-wielding companions made a run at them. Stiles hadn’t realized how lethargic he was from lack of sleep until he tried to dodge the oncoming attack.

He feinted right, anticipating the move would have the guy clipping his shoulder, but his body would not move fast enough and he was violently tackled into the wall. He didn’t think twice about head-butting the man before he could get the upper hand. The guy was momentarily stunned by the blow, giving Stiles the opportunity to throw the strongest punch he could muster, pleased when it sent the bastard to the floor.

The hit sent shockwaves of crippling pain up his arm from his fingertips. The man with the staff took advantage of his debilitation, swinging the pole at Stiles head. He ducked quickly, causing the guard to slam it into the wall. The force of the impact snapped it in half, leaving the man with two weapons instead of one, both with newly jagged edges.

“Okay. I was wrong. Not a bo or jo staff.” Stiles didn’t believe they would break quite so easily. “Probably a broom.”

The man swung again, Stiles jerked to the left to avoid another blow, only to feel a sharp jab against his stomach, the impact like a punch to the gut. Time stood still as Stiles glanced down at the weapon, the second staff piece. The spiked edge ripped through the barrier of skin and impaled the meaty flesh of his side.

He stumbled back and the guard let him, releasing his hold on the weapon buried inside Stiles. His own hands grasped the wood jutting out from the wound, fighting every instinct that told him to pull it out. His breathing picked up as the panic set in, seeing the blood coating the edges around the staff, staining his shirt.

“Kid,” Strong hands gripped his shoulders, he gazed upward to find Nero’s brown orbs looking back at him. “You with me?”

“Careful! There’s….” He glanced around the older man, seeing the guard who stabbed him on the
ground with the other staff poking out of his chest. “What? When?”

“Focus, kid.” Nero smacked his cheek gently to keep him in the present. “You back with me or are you going into-”

“I’m not going into shock.” He might have zoned out, lost enough time for Nero to take out all three guards, but he was back now. “Did you find the keys?”

“Yeah.” The older man dangled the set in front of his face. “There’s a hallway that leads to the stairs and one other door down here, aside from the one way came out of.”

“They’re down here.” They had to be, Theo and his goons had brought he and Juice down there together. “Let’s get them before the rest of the posse shows up.”

He let Nero take the lead once more as he hobbled to the other end of the hall. The door was dead bolted shut, but thankfully, there were only two keys on the ring Nero found and the first one worked. He motioned for Stiles to stay back as he pulled the door open and scanned the room.

“They’re here.” Nero barely had the words out of his mouth before Stiles was pushing past him into the room.

Juice was strapped to a chair, identically to how Stiles had been. His shirt was torn open, his chest painted ugly shades of purple and black. He looked worse than Stiles did and that was saying something.

“Juice,” Stiles breathed his name like a prayer, relief flooding him. “Are you okay?”

“Stiles…” Juice’s head listed to the side as Stiles shuffled over to him. “How?”

“New friend.” He jerked a thumb toward Nero. “I’m gonna get you out of here.”

It was a task to get on his knees next to the chair without jostling the pole in his side, but it felt a hell of a lot better than bending over to see to Juice’s bonds. He inspected the ties thoroughly, bringing his hands up to unknot them before remembering the agonizing pain that came with using them.

“Nero, I-I need one of the knives. I c-can’t…” He stammered, holding his hands up and cursing his own uselessness.

“Stiles, your fingers…” Juice’s tone was one of worry and righteous anger.

“Wait till you get a look at my side.” He mumbled. “Nero, the knife-“

“I’ll do it.” Nero assured him. “I’ve got to get her out first.”

Stiles took notice of the woman in the chair several feet away. She was nearly untouched, like Nero. The torture hadn’t begun for them yet. She had no ailment that kept her from standing tall once she was freed from the rope tying her down.

Nero moved to Juice without hesitation, cutting away the ropes around his wrist. The older man then grasped Juice’s bicep to help him to his feet. Juice was steady for about half a second before he groaned and slipped Nero’s grip, ending up on the floor next to Stiles.

“Fuck.” Juice hissed, arms wrapped protectively around his ribs.

“How many are broken?” Stiles own hand hovered over Juice’s torso. He was afraid to touch,
afraid to hurt Juice more than he already was.

“All of them.” Juice took a shaky breath. “That’s what it feels like anyway.”

“You could have internal bleeding.” It was going to make getting him out of the theater difficult. “If we’re not careful moving you, you could puncture or collapse a lung, or lacerate one of your organs.”

“My foot’s broken too.” Juice nodded to his other injury. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“The hell you aren’t.” Stiles was not about to leave him behind.

“I’ll slow you down.”

“Wherever we’re going, we’ve got to do it now.” Nero’s friend spoke up for the first time since they broke through the door. “The other guards are going to come check things out soon.”

“Just let me think!” Stiles pleaded, the severity of the situation overwhelming him. “Give me a minute.”

He shifted on his knees, breathing through the pain the movement caused. He steadied the end of the staff with his hands, as his eyes wandered to Juice foot and up to discoloration of his chest. It was when his gaze flickered to the able-bodied pair in the room that an idea came to mind.

Nero and the woman were unharmed. They could run without injuries to impair them. They weren’t struggling to breathe or moaning in pain. They could get out quietly, undetected.

The plan Stiles was formulating hinged upon trust. He hadn’t spent nearly enough time with Nero to develop that kind of trust, but he had to work without it. He had to rely on what kind of man Nero was underneath it all.

“Who’s Lucius?” Stiles asked, referring to the tattoo on Nero’s neck.

“My son. He was my son.” Was, as in he was gone now. “Why?”

“Do you have anyone else? Family?” Did he have someone important to him waiting for him to come home?

“There’s a woman, Venus, she’s like my little sister. I’ve looked after her since she was a teenager.” A familial bond born out of friendship, that said a lot about the man. “She’s at our camp.”

“I have brothers, family, friends. W-We do.” He placed the palm of his nail-less hand on Juice’s knee. “They’re waiting for us.”

“Then we need to get going.” Nero’s friend insisted. “The more time we waste, the less chance we have of getting out of here.”

“We can’t go. Juice can’t walk. The more I move, the more this staff shifts inside me, doing more damage. I can’t shoot with my hands like this. I can’t defend myself.” He and Juice would be liabilities in an escape attempt. “I need you to go to our camp and tell them where we are.”

“It’s safe where we’re from.” Juice added. “We have walls. Your camp would be safe there. If you help us, you could stay.”

“What’s to stop them from killing you the moment they realize Braeden and I are gone?”
“They still haven’t gotten the information they want from us.” They were more likely to be punished than killed. “And if they do, then at least our family will know and can have some kind of closure.”

“All right. We’ll go.” Nero agreed. “Where is it and who are we talking to?”

“The first rest stop north of the city limits on 99. There’s a black Jeep parked between two big rigs.” The keys had been forcibly taken from him, but Stiles was confident that Nero and Braeden could figure out how to get in and hotwire it. “There’s a map in the glove compartment that marked the route we took to get here. Just back track. When you get to the gate, ask for Jax. The first thing you say to him is beacon and then wolfsbane. It’s how he’ll know you’re friendly.”

“There’s still one problem. We don’t know how the hell to get out of here without being spotted.” Braeden pointed out. “Fighting our way out would draw too much attention.”

“Upstairs, in the hall before the steps, there were two doors. When they brought us past them, the one on the right was open. It had a window that led to the alleyway.” Juice reported, making a wild hand gesture toward the direction of the stairwell. “Chances are they’ll hear you open it.”

“You’ve got sixty seconds to get to that room, then I’m gonna make some noise to get them down here.” Stiles told them, knowing the only way this could work was with a distraction. “Be careful. Make sure you’re not followed.”

“We got it.” Nero held out a spare knife to them. “Take out as many as you can.”

“We’re trying to stay alive.” Juice pushed the weapon away. “They’ll kill us for even trying to use it.”

“Just go, guys.” Stiles urged them on. “We’ll be fine.”

Getting the fence back up with the packs assistance was easier than Jax expected it to be. He got along with the group just fine, so long as he kept his mind off his brother. He and Opie even got to know them a bit by playing twenty-questions.

“I’ve got one.” Opie announced as they warped a piece of chainlink into place. “You guys were on the road awhile. What’s the creepiest place you’ve been?”

“Vegas.” Isaac and Cora answered in unison.

“No, I meant after the apocalypse.” Opie clarified.

“Yeah, so did they.” Derek muttered.

“We climbed that coaster at the New York-New York hotel, and slept in the carts stuck at the top.” Scott said excitedly, as if sleeping on an abandon roller coaster was the best thing in the world.

“I wanted to stay at the Eiffel Tower replica. I was outvoted by the children.” Peter commented sourly. “If Stiles had been with us, he would have chosen Paris.”

“Stiles would have picked Circus Circus.” Jax knew that because he had taken Stiles to Vegas once as a kid, and the boy had run through that particular hotel like he was on speed. He also threw the world’s biggest tantrum when it was time to leave. “You know, Peter, I’ve got to ask, ‘cause it’s
been on my mind since you told me. Why did Stiles set you on fire?"

“He was trying to murder us all.” Derek remarked before his uncle could get a word in edge wise.

“I was insane.” Peter claimed defensively. “I’m much healthier now.”

“Right.” Jax didn’t buy that, but the guy hadn’t gone on a murderous rampage through town yet, so he was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. “Is this as far south as you guys have been since all this started?”

“Yes. I mean, Mom and I talked about going to San Francisco. It’s where my dad is, or was, I guess.” Scott replied somberly. “We were going to try and find him, but it was too dangerous.”

“Give his name to Sergio at the communications tower.” Jax suggested. “We’ve got a list of missing family members in case we get a hold of other towns.”

“Danny put my dad’s name on the list already.” The alpha acknowledged.

“How’s he doing at the tower?” He usually left the guys at the tower on their own. They were a bit territorial when it came to their tech. “With Juice out of town, he’s kinda gotten thrown into the deep end.”

“He’s good. He likes it.”

“There’s a car coming up the road.” Derek blurted out suddenly, eyes darting to the gate. “Sounds like the jeep.”

It was several minutes before the vehicle came bounding up the road. It veered wildly on the pavement, as if the driver wasn’t comfortable behind the wheel.

“Stiles let you paint the Jeep?” Scott’s tone implied they committed the ultimate sacrilege by changing the detail of the car.

“Let is a strong word.” Opie mumbled to himself.

“That’s not Stiles.” Jax growled as the Jeep came to a dead stop just outside the gate. ”That’s not them.”

He had his gun out of its holster and was stalking toward the Jeep before he realized he was doing it. He gave the man driving the Jeep no chance to react as Jax yanked open the door and pulled him out by his collar. He pushed the older man against the side of the vehicle, shoving the pistol in his face.

“Who are you?” Jax roared, the barrel of his gun pressed firmly to the man’s temple. “Where did you get this Jeep?”

“Whoa! Beacon!” The man yelled, putting his hand up in surrender. “He said to tell someone named Jax, beacon.”

“I’m Jax. Who told you to say that?”

“Stiles.” The woman climbing out of the passenger seat informed him. “He told us to say beacon and wolfsbane.”

“Wolfsbane?” Beacon was a Charming safe word the run teams used if they were sending someone they met on the road to town. Jax was lost on wolfsbane. “I don’t know what that is.”
“I do.” Scott stepped forward. “It’s a code word we used.”

“What the hell does it mean?”

“It means they’re in trouble.”

Tully had not seemed the least be perturbed to find two captives missing, or to see Stiles and Juice huddled together in the corner of the dark room. His only response was a coy smirk, before he left the room with a slam of the door and nothing else.

“Are you sure you shouldn’t take that out?” Juice asked, glancing down at the stick protruding from Stiles side.

“It’s working like a cork, keeping the blood from pouring out of me.” In other words, he would likely bleed out if they removed it. “It’s keeping me alive.”

“You should have left.” He leaned his forehead against the younger man’s. “You could have made it. You could be home right now, letting Tara fix you up, instead of being trapped here with me.”

“I wasn’t going to leave without you.” The soft smile on Stiles lips didn’t take away from the conviction in his voice.

“You really think Nero and Braeden went to Charming?” Juice would bet money that they took the Jeep, the supplies in it, and booked it in the opposite direction.

“I don’t know.” Stiles winced as he shrugged his shoulders. “I was banking a lot on faith when I told them to go.”

“Oh god, we’re going to die.” Juice slumped down further on the wall, accepting his fate. “If you are relying on faith, then we are definitely doomed.”

“Oh, bite me.”

Chapter End Notes

Next: Three Sons and three pack members embark on a rescue mission. A visitor shows up at the gates.
If I Don't Make It Out Tonight

Chapter Notes

Unbeta'd.
Warnings: Gore, violence.
Chapter title comes from Bad Blood by Alison Mosshart and Eric Arjes.
*For those of you who haven't watched season 5 of Teen Wolf, in this chapter there is a brief reference to a scene from 5x06 Required Reading, where Claudia attacks Stiles.

When Scott and Stiles were kids, Stiles would come home from Charming and tell Scott every little thing that happened while he was there. The tales tended to revolve around Jax and Opie. It was hours upon hours of my brothers did this or my brothers taught me that or something along those lines.

Scott had been so eager to hear it all at first, but at a certain point, the stories left him feeling jealous and sad, because he didn’t have a brother to do any of those things with. When he expressed those feelings to Stiles, the other boy had punched him in the arm and told him to stop being dumb ‘cause they were brothers too. From that moment on, that was what they were, brothers, family.

Family, by birth or bond, was a beautiful blessing or the worst kind of curse. If you had family, you had something to lose. Scott had felt that kind of loss and he knew Jax had as well.

They had both mourned the same person at different times. Now, here they were again, drowning in the ‘what ifs’ of their current situation. Only this time neither of them were willing to accept Stiles death as a possible outcome.

It was why they had all gathered in the clubhouse, they needed to work together, to strategize how to get Stiles and Juice back. The newcomers had been as helpful as they could be, handing over the map from the Jeep, and drawing a quick sketch of the theaters layout. They had given all the information they possibly could before being sent off to the clinic for an evaluation.

Peter had the map spread out over the pool table and busied himself tracing alternate routes to Sacramento. Derek was studying the theater layout with a look that suggested the sketch had personally offended him. Scott had tried to help them, but found that he couldn’t focus on the plan anymore than the Sons could.

Chibs was pacing the length of the room like a caged animal, mumbling things under his breath that Scott couldn’t make out. Opie was at the bar, silent and stoic, his scent was the only indicator of his fear. Jax was something else entirely.

SAMCRO’s president stood tall, with his head held high. He seemed both steady and strong, despite the crushing weight of stress on his shoulders. There was no panic or anxiety wafting off him, only anger and determination.

Scott was struck by the realization that he had seen it all before. If he replaced the clubhouse with the cliff house, and switched the cigarette between Jax’s fingers for a rifle in Stiles hands then he had the same scene. It was the same hard set of the jaw, tightness around the eyes, and nearly the same reason for it.
In Port Angeles, Scott had written it off as Stiles vengeful rage over losing his father. He knew better now, he could see it for what it really was. The expression on Stiles face then was identical to the one Jax wore now. It was not vengeance that kept Stiles in the house that day, it was his need to protect his friends. Stiles had been hell-bent on ensuring the pack made it to safety, the same way Jax was hell-bent on bringing Stiles home now.

It was all so quiet in the clubhouse, ominously silent in a way it never had been before. The news of their missing family members had left them all in a limbo-like state. They were still reeling, waiting for the numbness to wear off so they could determine how to proceed with the information they were given.

It was his job to do, he knew that. As SAMCRO’s president and Charming’s leader, as Stiles big brother, it was his responsibility to make the hard choices. He couldn’t do that this time. He couldn’t bring himself to remain objective when it was his baby brother in danger.

“How would you normally handle a situation like this?” Derek questioned, his eyes never leaving the sketch in his hands.

“We’ve never had a situation like this.” Opie admitted tiredly. “Our run teams are pretty good at coming back.”

“What about when Stiles was…” Scott worried his bottom lip between his teeth as he found the right words. “Before he came back from Charming, did you look for him?”

“Of course we did.” Jax spoke up for the first time since they entered the clubhouse. “We went to Beacon Hills and every evacuation center in northern California. Every time a run team went out, they looked for him.”

“For how long?”

“Until he came home.” The club never stopped looking for Stiles, not only because he was Jax and Opie’s little brother, but because they loved him too. “We didn’t give up on him then and we’re not giving up on him now.”

“The difference this time is, we know where he is. We wouldn’t be running around like chickens with our heads cut off.” Chibs acknowledged as he walked over to the bar to pour himself a glass of scotch.

“Don’t drink that.” Jax admonished the son. “I need your head clear.”

“Do you have a plan in mind?” Peter lifted his head from the map to ask.

“Opie, Chibs, and I are going to Sacramento to bring Stiles and Juice home.” It wasn’t a plan so to speak, but it was a start.

“You know you can’t go, Jackson.” It was so unlike Opie to say something softly, as if he were cushioning a blow.

“You know you can’t stop me.” There was no force on heaven or earth that could keep him from going after his brother.

“You are the leader of this town.” Chibs reminded him. “If something happens to you—“

“Then someone else will take the throne.” Jax was under no illusion that he was irreplaceable.
“That person would be Opie, and if something happened to him, it would be Stiles.” The Scot listed off their chain of command. “I’m pretty sure that I’m in line after Stiles. The four of us will be gone and if we don’t come back, who do you expect to run things?”

“Piney.” If anyone had earned the right and respect to do it, it was the old man. “He can handle things while we’re gone and if we don’t make it back.”

“We’ll make it back.” Opie shut down the idea that they wouldn’t. “I still don’t think it’s a good idea for you to go. You haven’t been out of Charming since the walls went up.”

“I lost Stiles once. I will not lose him again. He’s out there, hurt, and he needs me.” The others might not be okay with him going, but he would be damned if that was going to stop him. “Is that clear?”

“Aye.” Chibs nodded. “The three of us will go get them.”

“Four.” Scott raised his hand like a child in class. “I’m going with you.”

“Six.” Derek volunteered himself and his uncle for the mission.

“No.” Jax didn’t trust them, especially not with the lives of his family at stake. “Not happening.”

“You need us.” Scott argued. “Nero and Braeden said the people who had them had over a dozen well armed guards. You cannot take them all on yourselves.”

“We could hear or smell anyone coming long before you could.” Peter reasoned. “No one will be able to sneak up on us.”

“If you won’t take us with you, we’ll just take our own vehicle and meet you there. It’s not like we don’t know where we’re going.” Derek gestured to the map.

“We left Stiles to die, right?” If Scott thought bringing that up would help his case then he really needed to have his head examined. “Let us make that right. Let us help save him and your friend.”

“It’s the smart play, and Stiles wouldn’t want us to go off half-cocked.” Opie’s continuous support of the pack was beginning to irritate Jax, more so when the reason for it made sense. “We need all the help we can get. Having them with us increases our chances of success.”

“And survival. I can turn someone who’s badly injured.” Scott flashed his red alpha eyes. “Nero said Stiles and Juice were both hurt and it’s bad enough that they couldn’t escape. If we don’t think they’ll make the trip back to town, I’ll turn them.”

“Stiles does not want to be a werewolf.” Peter mentioned offhandedly. “He told me as much when I offered to bite him when I was the alpha.”

“You did what?” Derek furrowed his brows.

“Did I never tell you that? Silly me.” The elder Hale chuckled.

“You can come with us.” Jax agreed, nipping the werewolf conversation in the bud before Scott could get any ideas. “You need to be at the gate, ready to go, in an hour.”

“I need to go to the clinic to pick up the supplies.” Chibs was halfway out of the clubhouse as he spoke.

“I’ll go with you. I have to talk to my mom before we go.” Scott joined Chibs by the door.
“We’ve all got things to do before we leave.” Whether it was speaking to the ones they loved or gathering supplies they would need. “Just be at the gate in exactly an hour.”

Gemma usually spent her days at the diner or the inn. If she wanted to get her hands dirty, she tended to the gardens. Today, she was home, attempting to adjust Nate to his new caregiver.

“Normally, he stays with me at the diner.” She informed the woman who would be responsible for her father during the day. “He gets bored and wanders off when things get busy.”

“Do you want me to keep him in the house all day?” The woman did not seem thrilled with that idea.

“No. He needs fresh air and exercise.” She would not treat her dad like a prisoner. “Just keep a close eye on him when you take him out.”

“I will.”

“See that you do. Now, he—“ Gemma’s instruction was cut off as the door in the kitchen opened and her son came walking through it. “Jackson.”

“Hey, Mom.” He offered her a small smile that faltered when he noticed the woman beside her. “Um….”

“You remember Blythe, don’t you?” Gemma rested a hand on the other woman’s back. “She’s gonna be looking after your grandpa during the day.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“What’s going on?” It was clear from the despondent expression on her eldest’s face that something was wrong. He wasn’t trying to hide it, not from her at least.

“Opie, Chibs, and I are heading out on a run.” Jax’s team roster set warning bells off in Gemma’s, if only because her son did not participate in runs.

“Why?”

“Kids are in trouble.” The club only referred to two people as kids, and they happened to be the ones currently out on a run. “Gotta go get ‘em.”

“How do you know they’re in trouble?” Did the boys send out an SOS signal over the radio or was Jax relying on some kind of brother-to-brother ESP?

“Two people came up to the gate, the kids sent them.” Jax explained.

“They’re hurt.” Stiles and Juice would only have sent people along if they were not physically able to come themselves.

“We’ll get them back. They’ll be fine.” Her oldest boy assured her. “Tig and Bobby are going out too. The people the kids sent have a camp, we promised to bring them in. Tiggy and Bobby are gonna make sure they get there and back safely.”

“Okay.” There was more to it than that, Jax wouldn’t send two club members off with strangers just to bring back more strangers if there wasn’t. “I’ll look in on Tara and the boys while you’re
gone."

"Thanks." He kissed her cheek. "Piney’s in charge. If you need anything, talk to him."

"Be careful"

"I promise."

Gemma felt hollow as she watched her eldest child’s retreating back. She was aware of how dangerous it was outside the walls, but she also knew the club never had much of a problem out there. They could take care of themselves. However, she couldn’t help but feel there was something different about this time.

"Are you okay?" Blythe’s concerned voice pulled her from her thoughts. "Knowing your son will be out there can’t be easy."

"It’s not only Jax. Opie is like one of my own.” She reached up to fiddle nervously with the cross around her neck. “My youngest boy and his old man are the kids they’re going out there to pick up.”

“I’m sure they’ll be fine.”

“Of course they will.” Her boys were strong, every one of them.

The sound of someone humming coaxed Juice from his restless slumber. It was an effort to open his sleep heavy eyes, and he regretted it almost instantly when he managed it. His place slumped against Stiles, head resting on the younger man’s shoulder, placed his line of sight directly at the kid’s injuries.

The object lodged in the side of Stiles stomach appeared to be keeping his blood on the inside, as the younger man said it would, but it was not as effective as a cork in a wine bottle. It did not keep the blood from sluggishly seeping out around the edges of the wooden stake. The stain of red on the younger man’s shirt grew larger as time passed.

Stiles hands were not in any better shape. They were laying palms up on his thighs, just below his stomach wound. The tips of his fingers were bruised purple, dried blood streaked down to his knuckles. They were trembling uncontrollably, either from the brutality they had suffered or from the strain of being locked in a claw-like position. The scarred over burns on his palms paled in comparison to the new damage and it made Juice nauseous.

He forced his gaze upward to take in Stiles sickly pale complexion. A feverish sweat soaked his forehead and cheeks, dripping off him like a raindrops. His lips were pressed tightly together, the humming Juice had awoken to emanating from them.

“Can I get some lyrics to go with that tune?” He requested jokingly, fully expecting Stiles to deny him.

“‘Everyone’s looking for someone to blame,’” Stiles voice cracked as he crooned out a few lines from the second verse of a familiar song. “‘But you share my bed, you share my name...’”

“I share your bed.” Technically, Juice shared his bed with Stiles, but the lyrics still fit. “Is that a proposal?”
“It might be.” Stiles quipped halfheartedly. “Out of curiosity, what would you say if it was?”

“Well, we haven’t been together long.” All together it had been about a year since they started this thing between them. “But seeing as the worlds gone to shit and we’re probably going to die soon, probably in this room, I would say, sure, why the hell not?”

“That is just so romantic.” Stiles gushed, fluttering his lashes dramatically. “I may swoon.”

“If you swoon, it’ll be ‘cause of blood loss.”

“Yeah, that’s true.” The younger man nodded. “Do you know that song I was humming? Hold On by Tom Waits. You should finish it, while I try to fall asleep. Sing me to sleep.”

“My voice is terrible.” He lifted a hand to caress Stiles swollen jaw. “What happened here? He hit you?”

“Pulled out three of my back teeth.” Stiles mumbled, leaning his head against Juice’s. “Son of a bitch is probably fastening them into a nice necklace.”

“So they’re both creeps.” It became obvious during the duration of their stay in the theater of horrors, that Tully and Theo were the ones in charge, the other guys were just lackeys.

“Now, that’s not a nice thing to say, Pretty.” Tully drawled from the cell doorway, and Juice couldn’t help but wonder how long he had been standing there or how long the door had been open.

“What do you want?” He spit at their captor.

“The same thing I’ve wanted since you got here.” His name and his camps location. “Since Theo is out doing other things today, I’ll get a chance to play with his toy too. It’s Stiles, isn’t it?’

“Fuck you.” Stiles snarled as Tully came to crouch in front of them.

“Theo said you were a defiant one. Although he did not mention how rude you were.” Tully extended his hand quickly, grabbing a hold of the wooden pole in Stiles gut, giving it a sharp twist, and making Stiles cry out in pain. “A bad attitude will get you punished. Understood?”

“Oh, yes sir.” Stiles sassed, earning another twist of Tully’s hand. “Son of a bitch!”

“Leave him alone!” Juice kicked out his good foot, hitting Tully’s knee. His weakened state prevented him from putting any real strength behind the kick. “You want to hurt someone for information? Do it to me. You leave him alone.”

“No!” Stiles shouted. “Don’t touch him! Do what you gotta do to me.”

“Awe, young love.” Tully grinned widely. “It makes you sacrificial.”

Their captor took his time studying their faces. His eyes flickered from Stiles to Juice and back again, as if he were deciding who he would begin with. Juice threw a protective arm across the younger man’s chest when Tully’s gaze landed on Stiles alone. Tully rolled his eyes at the move, reaching behind himself to remove the gun from the holster hooked to his belt.

“So willing to protect the one who holds your heart.” Tully clucked his tongue as he pressed the barrel of the gun to Juice’s head. “How far are you willing to go, Stiles? What are you willing to give up to keep a bullet out of his skull?”

“Nothing.” Stiles smirked confidently. “Shoot him and you lose the only leverage you have.”
“Is that so?”

“You think I’ll talk if he’s dead?” The younger man snorted. “You’re not gonna kill him unless you plan to kill me right after. You’re not gonna do that, because then you won’t get the information you want.”

“What’s to say I don’t already know everything I need to know?” Tully questioned, sitting back on his haunches.

“The fact that you’re still threatening to kill one of us for that information.” Juice sniggered. “You’re not very smart, are you?”

“He did bring a gun in here, threatened us for information, and then claimed to have that information.” Stiles shook his head at the stupidity of their captor. “The gun thing is a biggy, though. That was by far the worst decision he’s made since he came into the room.”

“I don’t think it was.” Tully mused, his finger tapping the trigger lightly. “I would love to hear why you do.”

“Well, getting in real close like this,” Juice drummed his fingers against Stiles chest, a twitch of his hand to Tully, but a code to Stiles. “Makes this easy.”

Juice jerked his arm up, knocking the gun away, ‘causing it to go off, the bullet ricocheting off the wall next to his head. In the same moment, Stiles shot out his leg, landing a solid hit to Tully’s chest, sending him sprawling to the floor. Juice took advantage of the man’s disorientation, scrambling to pick up the gun that had clattered to the ground. Stiles shoved his foot in Tully’s face, not allowing him to regain his bearings.

“Stop!” Juice smacked a free hand against Stiles knee to keep him from kicking Tully again.

With a clear view, he aimed the gun with an unsteady hand. He fired a single shot at Tully’s head, blowing a hole into one cheek and out the other. It might’ve been Stiles paranoia rubbing off on him that caused him to aim a little higher and fire a second shot into the unmoving body’s forehead.

“Did you get him?” Stiles huffed, pushing the body away with his feet.

“Just making sure.” He lowered the gun and checked the clip, finding it only half-full. “If we can find some more ammo, we can take out the guards in the building.”

“If we can get the ones in the building, we could have time to make it out of here before the other guys get back.” Stiles reasoned, stumbling up to his feet. “We didn’t go with Nero and Braeden because they had to get out fast. We won’t have to be as fast if we can use that gun to clear this place.”

“We won’t get very far.” Their injuries would hold them back. “We might be able to make it to another building, but we’ll need weapons, more than this gun. We’ll have walkers to worry about if we leave the theater.”

“We need to find our stuff.” They had a nice assortment of weaponry to choose from in their packs. “Maybe we should find our shit and barricade ourselves in a room.”

“Take out whoever comes to kill us.” It would only work if they found more ammunition. “Wait for the cavalry to come.”
“They’ll look for us here first.”

“Yeah.”

“All right. Come on.” Stiles held out a hand to him. “Let’s get you up.”

“I can get up on my own.” He had to use the wall to leverage himself up, but it was better than putting extra strain on Stiles injuries. “It’s staying up and walking that’s the problem.”

“I’ll help you walk.” Stiles snatched Juice’s arm, draping it over his shoulders to take most of his weight. “I can’t shoot, so you’ll have to keep us alive.”

“No pressure.”

He thought the birthday trip to the zoo would lift the kid’s spirits. Instead, it just made the boy sullen and withdrawn. He was dragging his feet, refusing to look up from the cement sidewalk to see the animals in their enclosures.

“Okay. That’s enough.” Jax came to a standstill, forcing the boy to stop with him. “You pissed at me?”

“No.” Stiles grumbled, fidgeting with the strings of his hoodie.

“Then what’s the problem?”

“I don’t want to be here.” The boy stomped his foot, looking all of two years old instead of eight. “I want to be with Mommy and Daddy.”

“Your parents wanted you to have fun today.” John refused to let Stiles stay cooped up in a hospital room on his birthday. He thought Stiles should be out having fun, like a normal kid. “Zoo, cake, presents.”

“I don’t want presents.”

“What do you want that I can actually give you?” Jax asked as he led his little brother to a bench to sit down.

“I want…” Stiles bowed his head, as if he were expecting nothing but disappointment. “I want you to come stay in Beacon Hills with me.”

“Stiles.” It wasn’t the first time the boy had asked that of him, and he doubted it would be the last. “You know, I—“

“Not forever! Just until Mom gets better.” He argued pitifully, gripping a handful of Jax’s kutte in his fist, like he thought Jax might run off. “Stay with me and Dad until Mom comes home from the hospital.”

“Buddy, your mom isn’t…” His mom wasn’t going to be coming home, and Jax was sure John and Claudia had explained that to him. “Why do you want me to come stay?”

“‘Cause I miss you when I’m in Beacon Hills and you’re in Charming.” Stiles sniffled, tears forming in his eye. “And since Mommy’s been in the hospital, I’ve had to go to the Hale’s after school, until Daddy gets off work.”
“You don’t like them?”

“I like them, but I want to see Mom after school.” The boy pouted. “Unless it’s Daddy’s day off, after school is the only time I can see her. I’ve ditched Laura Hale when she came to pick me and her sister Cora up from school, and walked to the hospital myself, but their dad works there. Dr. Hale is one of Daddy’s friends, so he always calls him.”

“And what does your dad do?”

“He leaves work to come see me. He always gives me this really sad look when he finds me at the hospital.” Sad was pretty much John’s default expression at this point. “He takes me to see Mom for a few minutes, and then drives me back to the Hale house, and picks me up when he’s done with work.”

“So, you want me to come live with you because you’re lonely?” With his dad working all the time to pay the doctor bills and his mother in the hospital, it wasn’t hard to figure out the boy was feeling left behind.

“Dad doesn’t want me to visit Mom by myself, ‘cause he’s afraid she’ll hurt me again.” He couldn’t blame John for that fear, he had seen the bruises Claudia left on Stiles. “If you were in Beacon Hills, you could pick me up after school and take me to see her for a little bit, and then we can hang out until Dad got home from work.”

“Buddy, I can’t come live in Beacon Hills.” He hated himself for saying it, for being the reason tears began falling from his little brother’s eyes. “I have work and –”

“The club.” Stiles resentment for SAMCRO taking up all Jax’s time reared its ugly head in the way he spat the word out like it left a dirty taste in his mouth. “Nevermind. Forget it. It was a stupid idea. I was being dumb.”

“No, you weren’t. It wasn’t stupid.” He reached out for the boy, only to have him recoil from his touch. “I would love to live closer to you, to see you more.”

“But you can’t.”

“I can’t move to Beacon Hills, but I can come visit more.” He could do better than the odd weekend and Stiles school vacations. “All you have to do is call, Stiles. It doesn’t matter what time it is or what I’m doing. If you call, I’ll come get you. I will always be there when you need me.”

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

Jax’s fingers flexed against the steering wheel as the memory of Stiles eighth birthday sat at the forefront of his mind. He made a promise that day, one he had always done his best to keep. It was a promise he would keep until the day he died, even if trying to keep it is what killed him.

“I promise.” He whispered the words to himself and to the kid who was not there to hear them. “I’m coming.”

“You think he heard you?” Opie questioned with honest curiosity rather than ridicule or sarcasm. “You think he knows we’re on our way?”

“He called.” Stiles sent Nero and Braeden with a message, in this day and age that was as good as a phone call. “He knows I’ll come get him. We’ll come get him.”
“You’re never going to let him leave Charming again, are you?” His VP chuckled, already knowing the answer.

“Oh, I’m gonna weld a metal cuff to his ankle,” It couldn’t be a standard handcuff, Stiles knew how to pick those. “It’ll have a chain attached to it that only allows him to go from home to work.”

“Order one of those cuffs and chains for Juicy too.” Chibs called from the back of the van.

“Do you have to keep doing that?” Peter asked, referring to Chibs repeatedly re-organizing the med kit. “Is it some kind of nervous tick?”

“I’m checking to make sure everything is there.” Chibs had been checking the inventory of the med kid every ten minutes since they left Charming. “Need to be prepared for when we get the boys.”

“Do you have actual medical training?” Scott inquired suspiciously. “Or did Dr. Knowles teach you a few things?”

“I was an army medic.”

“What’s the plan for when we get there?” Derek steered the conversation away from Chibs qualifications and back to the mission at hand.

“Four of us will go in to find Juice and Stiles.” Jax figured the safe play would be to send in two Sons and two wolves. “Chibs and Scott will wait in the van.”

“What? Why?” The alpha kicked up a fuss, as to be expected.

“We can’t risk anything happening to Chibs.” If there medic was killed or incapacitated, it would make the trip a body retrieval rather than a rescue operation. “And what we’ll have to do to get the boys back goes against your moral code. So, I think it’s best if you wait in the car as back up.”

“You don’t have to kill anybody.” Scott argued naively. “You can talk to the people who have them, make a deal to get them back. Nobody needs to die.”

“The last time you tried to make a deal involving my brother’s wellbeing, you sent his father out to die.” He couldn’t resist tossing that sin in the packs faces, taking pleasure in the guilt that overtook their expressions.

“Pop told you to play nice.” Opie muttered before addressing the wolves. “Stopping these people is not only about revenge. It’s about preventing them from hurting anyone else.”

“You can’t know that they’ll hurt anyone-“

“What world are you living in?” Jax seriously wanted to know what wires got crossed in Scott’s brain that caused him to think that way, even after the world had gone to shit. “Look, it’s noble to have a code to live by, I can respect that, but there’s a difference between being moral and being an idiot.”

“They’ve killed before, they’re torturing Stiles and Juice as we speak,” Chibs voice grew tight as he spoke. “Chances are they’ll do it again if we let them go.”

“You don’t know that!”

“Scott,” Peter huffed out a put upon sigh. “Firstly, you are making their case for leaving you in the
car. Secondly, the people that have Stiles are not just going to let us go in and take him. It will be kill or be killed, and as you’ve so consistently proven, you are not willing to do that.”

“Bottom line,” Jax slammed a hand down on the dashboard to capture everyone’s attention. “Opie, Derek, Peter, and I are going in to the theater. Chibs and Scott are staying in the car. That is the plan and it’s not up for discussion. Is that fucking clear?”

“If it’s not are you going to turn this car around, so help you God?” Opie snickered from the passenger seat.

“I will stop the car, throw whoever has the problem out right here, and we’ll pick them up on the way back, if they’re still alive.” Jax grumbled, glaring at his VP disapprovingly. “Now is not the time to be channeling our little brother.”

“He would smack me for passing up that opportunity.”

“Uh huh.”

Nero’s camp was set up inside an old railroad museum. It was as run down as the rest of Sacramento, looking as if it had been picked over by every Tom, Dick, and Harry that passed by. The windows were shattered, and the carpet and linoleum were caked in mud, giving the illusion that it was abandon.

“We didn’t want to clean it up, thought that might draw attention to it.” Nero explained, kicking through trash scattered around the floor. “The less lived in it looked, the less likely it was that someone would come search it.”

“Smart.” Bobby praised. “How long has your group been here?”

“Since the evacuation centers fell.” Those staying in the centers had to find new places to call home or head out on the road. “My kid liked trains, so we came here.”

“Have you two,” Tig nodded to Braeden, who was trailing behind them. “Been a group since the beginning?”

“No.” Nero shook his head. “No, it was just me, my boy, and my girl Venus, for a long time. I met Braeden when I was out on a med run. She saved my ass, and we’ve been running together ever since.”

“We’re picking up your friend and your son?” Bobby hoped they had an extra vehicle or it would be a tight fit in the Jeep.

“Just Venus.” Nero cleared his throat pointedly. “My son was sick, Spina Bifida. Walkers got in here and I couldn’t get to him fast enough, and he couldn’t get away.”

“Awful shit, man.” There was nothing worse than losing a child. “I’m sorry.”

“This is it.” Nero swiftly changed the subject as they came upon on the exhibits. “It’s an old sleeper car.”

Nero rapped his knuckles against the door of the train car, there was a pattern to it, probably a code giving the all-clear to whomever was inside. There was a rustling from behind the door before it
slid open. The barrel of a shotgun was visible before the woman behind it was.

“It’s all right, Venus.” Nero brought a hand up to keep the woman from firing the weapon.
“They’re with us.”

“Where in the hell have you been?” Venus lowered the weapon as she climbed out of the train car.
“I have been worried sick.”

“We got picked up at the convention center. These guys are friends with the guys who helped us escape.” Braeden offered her the short and simple story. “You should get your bag together. We’re leaving.”

“Where are we going?”

“They have a town, walls, and houses.” Nero gestured to Bobby and Tig. “It’s safe, we’ve seen it. They said we can come and stay.”

“Like we told you before we left, we’ve got a bit of a food shortage problem. Take that into account before you decide to come with us.” Bobby urged, wanting them to make an informed decision.

“We might have a solution to that.” Nero jerked a thumb toward another train car. “We’ve been scavenging for canned goods every time we go out. We got lucky hitting a few canneries in the beginning. We’re stocked enough to last a year, if it’s just the three of us. For a town your size, it could last the winter, or at least until you can get your farm up and running again.”

“You trying to tell us that you’ve got a train car full of canned goods?” Bobby questioned incredulously.

“And other non-perishables.”

“Do you have anything to haul it in?” Tig asked. “The Jeep ain’t gonna pull all that.”

“We’ve got a big truck with a trailer on the back.” Venus pointed a long fingernail toward the back of the property. “I can take you to it.”

“I would appreciate that, beautiful.” Tig smiled, holding out a hand to her. “Tig Trager.”

“Venus Van Damme.” The woman allowed Tig to kiss her fingers politely. “Let me show you to that truck so we can get this show on the road.”

“Okay.”

The orange backdrop from the rising sun only added to the haunting feel of the nearly vacant city streets. A handful of biters were ambling around the road, standing between them and their destination.

“Only a few stragglers,” Jax noted as he yanked his knife free from a walkers skull. “Big town like Sac, you’d think the streets would be crawling with them.”

“A bit suspicious, isn’t it?” Peter mused. “Perhaps it’s like what you do in Charming, clean and clear.”
“Could be.” It would mean the men who had Stiles and Juice had a hell of a lot more than a dozen people in their group. “Be on alert, guys.”

“Yes.”

They saw a dark SUV parked in front of the theater as they turned the corner. It was clean, as if it had been washed recently, and warm to the touch like the engine had just been running. It was a gutsy move to park it at the theater entrance, a challenge, ‘here we are, come and get us.’

“Empty.” Opie peered through the car windows. “We going through the front door?”

“Why the hell not?” At the very least, they could take the group by surprise.

They lobby was empty, the old ticket booth covered in dust, as if no one had touched it in years. There were two hallways on opposite sides of the concession stand, most likely leading to screening rooms where movies had once been shown.

“Nero said they were held in the basement.” Jax eyed the door just passed the concession area. “They could’ve moved them by now.”

“You guys getting anything?” Opie asked the wolves.

“I’ve got four heartbeats.”

“Five.” Peter corrected his nephew. “I can smell gunpowder, blood, and pain.”

“You can smell pain?”

“Among other things.” The elder Hale tilted his head to one side, listening to closely to something the humans could not hear. “One coming down the hall.”

A burly man carrying an AK and talking to himself came stalking down the hall from the left. He was a man on a mission, pissed as hell. He would have walked right past them had their reflections not shown in the plastic frame covering an old movie poster on the wall. He swung his weapon in their direction as he took notice of them, ending up with two bullets for the effort, one in his head and one in his chest, courtesy of Jax and Opie.

“Can you tell which way the heartbeats are coming from?” Jax questioned the Hales, hoping to find Stiles and Juice before anyone else could interrupt them.

“That way.” Derek pointed to the hall on the right. “Two of them are kind of echoing, like they’re in a large room.”

“One of the screening rooms.”

They started for the hall, seeing two assailants standing outside a door, talking amongst each other. The rapid hand movements they made suggested they were formulating some kind of plan. They must have figured it out quickly, because a second later they were kicking the door in.

One of the men dropped almost as soon as the door was forced open, surprising the hell out of the Sons and the wolves, who hadn’t fired a shot. The second man yelled unintelligibly, raising his gun, only to be riddled with bullets, shots being fired from the screening room.

"That was a bit disappointing." Peter muttered. "I was expecting more of a fight."

“Can you smell who is in that room?” Jax wanted to be sure they were not going to be the next
ones filled with bullets if they went near that door.

“The smell of blood is too strong.” Derek lifted a hand to his face as if he might cover his nose.

“Call for him, Jax.” Opie advised. “He’ll know he’s safe if he hears you.”

He kept close to the wall, in the off chance that it wasn’t Stiles or Juice in the room, Opie following closely behind. They stayed clear of the entryway, not wanting to spook anyone into firing their weapons.

“Stiles? Juice?” He called out to the missing Son and his little brother. “You guys in there?”

“Jax?” A weak voice replied.

“You two stay here and keep watch.” Jax instructed the wolves. “Just me and Opie.”

“We’re coming in,” Opie announced through the doorway. “Don’t shoot us.”

The bodies caught Jax’s eye as they entered the screening room. There were at least eight of them lining the steps between the columns of seats. He found Juice next, lying on the floor just below the bottom step, partially hidden behind a row of seats.

“Thank God.” Juice dropped the gun, discarding it beside another on the ground next to him. “There was one more guy-“

“We took care of him.” He assured the younger Son as he and Opie made their way down the steps.

Juice made no move to stand at their approach, and it was clear why once the extent of his injuries were visible. His bruised bare chest and discolored right foot prevented him from doing much. It almost looked as if he had tumbled down the stairs and crawled behind the seats for cover, sticking his body out just far enough to shoot his gun.

“Shit, Juice.” Opie unzipped his sweater, shrugging out of it to fit it around the other Son.

Jax found Stiles sitting several feet away, his back against the theater seats. He was still, too still, Jax might’ve thought he was dead if not for the shallow rise and fall of his chest. It was foreign object protruding from his brother’s side that startled Jax the most.

“Jesus.” He stumbled to his brother, crouching down in front of him. “Stiles?”

“Jax…” The younger man’s eye fluttered open slowly. “What are you doing here?”

“We came to save you.” He cast a glance to the bodies on the theater steps. “Looks like you had it all under control.”

“Juice did.” Stiles head lolled to the side to gaze at the other man before his eyes met Jax’s again. “I meant, what are you doing here?”

“You need me.” He ran his hand through his brother’s hair. “I’m gonna take you home.”

“Okay. Help me up.” Stiles lifted his arms, allowing Jax to grip him under his pits and pull him up from the floor. “Opie, be careful with him. He’s got a bunch of broken ribs, and that was before we fell down the steps.”

“I’ll be gentle.” Opie promised as he helped Juice to his feet. “Okay?”
“Yeah.” Juice claimed even as he swayed against the other man. “Fuck.”

“Our stuff.” Stiles waved a hand toward the seats. “We need our stuff, our shoes.”

“We’ll get ‘em.”

The theater seats were loaded with satchels and packs. There were weapons with the bags, along with shoes and clothing folded neatly beside them. The sheer number of belongings was enough to know the group working out of the theater had been killing people for a while.

Jax shook the thoughts of his brother being just another body to these bastards out of his mind as he scanned the room. Juice and Stiles packs were in the bottom row, which explained why the pair of them had tried to make it down the steps. They wanted to retrieve their things before attempting to leave.

“We should radio Tig and Bobby, tell them to stop here on their way home to pick up all this shit.” Jax suggested, not wanting all the available supplies to go to waste.

“The church down the street, it’s where they picked us up.” Stiles told them as Jax sat him down in a chair. “It’s got a storage closet full of canned goods.”

“They’ll stop and get them.” He said, leaning down to work the laces of the kid’s shoes. “I think you were three the last time I tied your shoes for you.”

“I’d do it myself but bending over hurts.” Stiles motioned to the wound on his stomach then wiggled his fingers. “And my hands are out of commission.”

“Tell me the guy who did this is dead.” Jax took one of his brother’s hands in his to inspect the damage.

“I haven’t seen him since they brought Nero in.” So, there was at least one person unaccounted for. “Juice got the one that tortured him.”

“Good job, Juicy.”

“Can we get the fuck out of here now?” The younger Son asked, a trail of blood running from the corner of his mouth down his chin.

“Yeah.” Both boys needed to get to the doctor sooner rather than later. “We’ll radio Chibs, tell him to pull the van around.”

The broken wood in his gut pulled against his skin with every step he took, making him whimper in pain. Jax tightened his hold on him as his whines grew louder. For reasons he wasn’t quite ready to interpret, it was harder for him to conceal his discomfort in his brother’s presence.

“Are we almost there?” His voice sounded far away to his own ears, as if the world was fading around him. “I’m tired, Jax.”

“We’re almost there, buddy.” Fuck, his condition must have been rough if Jax was calling him buddy, he only did that when Stiles was sick. “Derek, help Opie with Juice, get his other side. Peter, get the door.”

“When did they get here?” Stiles used what little strength he still had to find the Hales in the
theater lobby. “Have they been here the whole time?”

“Yes, we have.” Peter grinned, holding the door open for them. “We left Scott in the car.”

“Yay.” He had at least a two hour drive filled with the alpha’s patented puppy dog eyes to look forward to. “Keep your eyes open. There were more bad guys and walkers.”

“We know.”

The sun was brighter than Stiles expected, it blinded him as they exited the theater. He twisted his head to glance over his shoulder, making sure Opie and Derek were following with Juice. His distraction caused him to miss the curb of the sidewalk, causing him to trip, he would have smacked into the side of the van if Jax hadn't had a hold of him.

“Come on.” Scott shoved open the back doors, beckoning them in to the vehicle.

Chibs and the alpha took Stiles from Jax, helping him settle on a blanket laid out on the van floor. He scooted as far left as possible, leaving enough room for them to lay Juice down beside him. It was a tight fit for two grown men, but Stiles couldn’t care less, he felt safe for the first time in days.

“Derek, you okay to drive?” Jax asked as he shoved the backpacks into the van.

“Yeah.” Derek confirmed, hopping into the driver’s seat.

“Keys are in the ignition.” Chibs told him as he began looking over the kids. “Get in the van, guys, we gotta get these boys back to Charming.”

“Hurry it up.” Peter urged as he climbed into the back. “I can hear a car coming.”

Almost as soon as the words left the elder Hale’s mouth a pick-up came barreling down the road. Two men jumped out of the bed of the truck, firing automatic weapons in the van’s direction. Jax shoved Opie into the vehicle and climbed in himself before either of them could be struck by a flying bullet.

“Drive!” Jax shouted, attempting to dodge the oncoming gunfire.

The van jerked wildly as it took off, throwing everyone off balance, and causing Jax to nearly tumble out the open back doors. Stiles reared up to snatch a handful of his brother's sweater, a small effort to keep him from falling out of the van, while Scott pushed Jax down on top of Juice, shielding him from gunfire. Peter and Opie both reached for a door, wrenching them closed and latching them shut to prevent another incident or injury.

“Scott, you’re hit.” Stiles noticed the blotch of red on the alpha’s shoulder.

“It’s okay.” Scott extended his claws and dug them into his wound, removing the bullet with little difficulty. “It’ll heal.”


“It’s hard to breathe.” Juice admitted through a bloody cough. “It’s worse than before.”

“Pick up the pace, Derek!” Stiles yelled to the driver.

“Stiles, relax.” Jax maneuvered around the occupants of the van until he was sitting on the floor next to Stiles. “Chibs will take care of him.”
“His ribs, he could have punctured something.” Stiles stretched a hand out to Juice, needing to feel some part of him.

“Give him room to work, Stiles.” His older brother pulled him away, hauling him up until he was practically sitting in his lap. “Chibs will fix him up.”

“He looks bad, Jax.” Juice looked ten times worse now than he had in the theater. “Juice? Juice, I-“

“No! Don’t say it.” Juice used what energy he had left to narrow his eyes at Stiles. “Don’t say the words I love you to me right now. Don’t say them because you think you might not get another chance. The words lose their meaning if you're saying them because you think I might die.”

“Don’t die.” He pleaded, feeling tears sting his eyes.

“He’ll be fine, Stiles.” Jax rubbed his back soothingly. “Worry about yourself right now. Chibs, do we have anything to give him for the pain?”

“No.” Heavy pain medication was stored in the clinic, not taken on runs.

“I can do it.” Scott volunteered, rolling up his sleeves.

“No.” Stiles shook his head. “You’re still healing.”

“I’ll do it.” Peter wrapped his fingers around Stiles ankle.

“No.” He made a halfhearted attempt to pull away. “It’s okay. It’s not that bad.”

“Don’t be difficult.” Jax reprimanded. “Let them help you.”

“I’m okay. Use your pain drain mojo on Juice.” He mumbled, resting his head on his brother’s chest. “I’m okay. It doesn’t hurt.”

Kozik and Harley had the early shift at the gate. It was usually a dull affair, although nothing had been dull in recent weeks. So, it wasn’t all that shocking to see a teenager come traipsing out of the woods, pulling a little red wagon full of cans behind him.

“Can we help you with something?” Kozik took a protective stance in front of Harley, although the chick was more than capable of taking care of herself.

“I ran into some of your guys on the road. They said I could come here.” The kid looked up at them nervously, as if expecting to be turned away. “They said it was safe here. I brought food. It was all I could save after scavengers attacked my camp. I know it’s not much, but-“

“Which of our guys did you meet?” It was a smart question for Harley to ask, seeing as they had multiple teams out.

“S-Stiles? I think that’s what his name was.” He didn’t seem too sure of himself.

“What’s your name?”

“Theo Raeken.”
They cleared out the clinic, sent any non-essential personnel home. It left Tara and Melissa to get things ready, to prepare for the patients that were expected to arrive at any time.

“ Damn it.” Tara muttered as she double checked the medication they had available. “ We should have gone into St. Thomas to restock as soon as we learned the boys were injured.”

“ Do you think we still have time?” Melissa asked, glancing at the clock on the wall. “ I can get some of the pack members to help. We could try to get it done quick.”

“ No, No, the team will be here soon.” Whoever was driving the van was likely to have a lead foot on the gas the whole way home. “ We can’t risk not being here.”

“ What the strangers said about the boys’ injuries,” The nurse nodded to the files they had started on Juice and Stiles based on the information they were given. “ Stiles has a rare blood type, if he punctured- ”

“ He and Gemma share the same blood type.” Tara wondered if Stiles was grateful or resentful to share that trait with his biological mother. “ Anyone who comes through the gate, who’s clean, gives blood in case of an emergency. It’s in the fridge by the storage locker. I have some of Gemma’s blood in stock. If we need more I’ll call her in.”

“ She’ll help him?”

“ Of course.” Gemma would never willfully withhold something that could save her sons life. “ Any reason you think she wouldn’t?”

“ The last time I really saw them together, she had him backed into a corner at Claudia’s funeral.” With that in mind, Melissa’s lack of faith in Gemma’s willingness to help Stiles was understandable. “ It’s been a long time since then, things change, I know that.”

“ When I first came back to Charming, I noticed Stiles and Gemma’s relationship was an ‘ I dislike you, but I’ll be damned if I let anything happen to you’ kind of thing.” It was both sad and a little funny to watch. “ They tolerate each other now. It’s obvious they care about each other, but they don’t like to show it.”

“ You would think the apocalypse would make them more openly affectionate to one another.”

“ You would think, but it’s like pulling teeth with those two.” Stiles had definitely inherited Gemma’s stubbornness.

“ Dr. Knowles,” A male voice pulled their attentions toward the clinic doors they had not heard open. “ I’m Jamie Bishop, we met the other day.”
“I remember.” He had come in with an older woman, his mother, if Tara remembered correctly. “If this isn’t an emergency, I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

“Oh, um, Margaret Murphy radioed me and told me you might need my help with an emergency.” He shrugged out of his jacket and rolled up his shirtsleeves, ready to get to work. “I’m a doctor. I was scheduled to start work here tomorrow.”

“Oh.” Right, yes, she had a vague recollection of Mason mentioning someone would be joining the clinic staff, but he hadn’t said in what capacity. “I’m assuming you’re an MD not a PhD.”

“Yes. I had a family practice in Berkeley.” Jamie handed over a wrinkled old business card for his practice, feeling compelled to give her proof of his profession. “Do you still want me to go?”

“No. I will need your help today. We will need your help.” She put a hand on Melissa’s shoulder as a show of solidarity. “Two members of our run team were severely wounded. One was stabbed with a foreign object. The other has several broken ribs, possible internal bleeding, and a broken foot.”

“Do we have a location of the stab wound?”

“No.” The strangers had not been able to go into specifics. “And we only have an ultrasound machine to determine internal injuries.”

“It’s better than nothing.” The older man reasoned. “Do we have an ETA?”

“Anytime now.” Tara was certain they would be plowing through the gate soon enough. “There will be two of us per patient. Melissa, are you comfortable assisting with Stiles or-”

“I’ll be fine.” The nurse said certainly.

“Okay, you will be with me, but if the extent of Juice’s injuries outweigh Chibs skill-set, I’ll switch you out.” Chibs would throw a fit, but giving Juice the best chance of survival was more important than the Scot’s ego. “Dr. Bishop, you’ll be assisted by Chibs. He was an army medic, and currently in the field with the patients.”


“Go it.” She called back over the radio, then looked to the doctor and nurse under her command. “Let’s get the gurneys out front.”

Jax decided that Derek would never drive the van again after the wolf slammed on the brakes in the clinic parking lot. Jax had to brace a foot against the inside panel of the vehicle to prevent he and Stiles from smacking against it.

“Watch what the fuck you’re doing!” Chibs shouted at the driver, placing a steadying hand on Juice’s torso. “I’ve got a tube in his chest!”

“Sorry.” Derek murmured, as the back doors of the van were yanked open to reveal the clinic staff waiting with two hospital gurneys.

“Let’s, uh,” There was a momentary flash of panic crossed Tara’s face, before schooled her features back to her doctor’s mask of confidence and determination. “Let’s get Juice out first.
“Aye.” The Scot confirmed as he, Opie, and Peter moved Juice from the van to the gurney. “Who’s this guy?”

“Dr. Bishop, he’s going to help you with Juice.” Tara didn’t give Chibs a second to argue before she turned to Jax. “Come on, Jackson.”

“I’ve got him.”

He lifted his brother in his arms, just as he had done when he was a boy, and carried him out of the van. He was as gentle as he could be as he carefully laid him out on the gurney. Melissa and Tara were pushing the bed through the clinic doors before Jax could even remove his hands.

“How long has he been unconscious, Jax?” His wife asked when they had the gurney settled into the examination room. “I need you to back up, honey.”

“Not long, u-um,” He stammered, stepping back far enough to give the women room to work while still keeping a close eye on his brother. “He’s been in and out.”

“Melissa, take his vitals, please.” Tara instructed the nurse as she cut away Stiles shirt. “Dr. Bishop, I’m going to need that ultrasound machine as soon as you’re done with it.”

“Let me see about my patient’s internal injuries and then it’s all yours.” The other doctor promised.

“His blood pressure is lo- Oh, he’s coming around.” Melissa announced, removing the blood pressure cuff. “Stiles, sweetheart, can you hear me?”

“Hmm?” The younger man’s head lolled toward the nurse. “Mel’sa?”

“Yes, honey,” She smoothed a hand through his hair. “Can you tell m-“

“N-Not your watch.” Stiles mumbled, gaze catching on the woman’s wrist. “It’s not your w- watch.”

“What?” Nurse McCall furrowed her brows in confusion.

“That’s not your watch.” Stiles repeated.

“Oh, um,” She spared a glance to the wristwatch as if she’d forgotten she was wearing it. “No. I lost mine. Scott brought me this one back from a run.”

“No.” Stiles shook his head. “Not lost. Taken. They took it. I found it. I found it in St. Helens.”

“Stiles,” Tara came around the bed to Stiles other side. “Look at me.”

“Hmm?” The younger man’s eyes slowly found Tara’s. “You look s-scared. Don’t look scared. It makes Jax nervous.”

“Sweetheart,” She cradled his face between her hands to help him focus. “I need to remove the object lodged in your abdomen.”

“I know.” Stiles nodded. “It’s why we’re here. Y-You need to work on Juice first. He’s worse than me. He hasn’t woken up for hours. Chibs cut into his chest in the van.”

“Juice is in good hands.” Tara assured him, moving to purposefully obstruct his view of the Son.
“Stiles, keep your head still,” Melissa ordered as she attempted to put an oxygen mask over his mouth and nose. “Your oxygen level’s low, so –“

“No!” Stiles brought up a hand to push the mask away. “Oxygen is Piney’s. Those are his spare tanks.”

“And Piney wouldn’t mind you using one.” Jax was confident the old man would insist Stiles or Juice take what they needed. “We can find more tanks.”

“No!” Stiles snarled, seeming suddenly more alert than he had been moments before. “Tara, have you inventoried since the fire? What’s the, uh, the med situation?”

“We have enough for you.” If Tara had left the ‘for you’ unsaid, Stiles might’ve been more inclined to accept the medication. “I’m gonna put you out-”

“No!” The younger man said again, jerking away from the doctor’s touch. “We have to ration, save what we have for emergencies.”

“Don’t be a fucking hero, Stiles.” Jax chastised his little brother. “This is an emergency.”

“I’m awake, lucid, and my injuries aren’t immediately life-threatening.” Stiles had a funny idea of what ‘life-threatening’ meant. “I am perfectly capable of making decisions about my health. I’ve been through worse than this without medical attention. So, unless there are serious complications, I do not want any medication that we don’t have a steady supply of.”

“Stiles-“

“No medication!”

“Jax, Opie,” Tara sighed as she addressed them. “I need you to hold him down. It’s going to be his natural instinct to jerk away from the pain when I start.”

“I can take his pain.” Scott volunteered, just as he had done in the van.

“No.” Stiles shook his head once more. “You guys have been pain-draining Juice and I the whole way here. I know that it takes a lot out of you. You need to rest. But, you know, I’m not a complete masochist, so maybe you can get Cora or someone, please.”

“We’ll get her.” Derek and Peter were out of the clinic without another word.

“Let’s not wait for them. Let’s get started.” Stiles suggested. “Scott, can you help hold me down? I don’t want to hurt anyone.”

“Yeah.”

Scott took a spot at the end of the gurney, pinning Stiles legs to the bed. Jax stood with Tara at Stiles left, one hand on his brother’s shoulder and the other on his forearm. Opie took a similar position on Stiles right.

“All right.” Tara gripped the stick protruding from the side of Stiles abdomen.”One, tw-“

“Don’t count.” Stiles grumbled. “Just do it.”

“Three.” Tara obliged, sliding the object out quickly but deliberately.

“Oh f-fuck!” The younger man yelped, tears gathering in his eyes, and blood gushing from the
“Melissa, suction.” Tara ordered. “Bishop, I need that ultrasound machine, now.”

“Yeah, yeah. Here.” The other doctor pushed the cart holding the machine over.

“Okay. Let’s see.” Tara squeezed a glob of gel over Stiles skin before running the transducer over it, studying the image appearing on the screen. “Stiles, I want you to seriously reconsider your stance on medication.”

“No.” ‘No’ was apparently the kid’s mantra for the day. “Tell me what you see.”

“There’s a laceration in your spleen.” Tara turned the ultrasound screen toward Stiles so he could see the damage for himself. “And there are splinters of wood, left behind from the jagged edge of that broken broom stick, imbedded in your wound. I’m going to have to use tweezers to remove them before I can do anything else.”

“Okay. You can play operation. Just give me a s-second.” Stiles took a shaky breath. “C-Chibs?”

“Little busy here, love.” The Scot grunted.

“Is Juice okay?” It shouldn’t have surprised any of them that Stiles would put off his own treatment to check on someone he loved.

“He’s breathing.” Chibs answer was evasive enough not to give out much information on Juice’s condition, but honest enough to put Stiles at ease. “When he wakes up, he’ll be expecting you to be breathing too, so let Tara do what she’s gotta do.”

“Yeah. Okay.”

“You three,” Tara scowled at Jax, Opie, and Scott. “Hold him very still. If he flinches while I’m doing this-“

“We’ve got him.” Jax made a show of adjusting his hold on his brother.

“Stiles, honey,” She leaned over the boy to make eye contact. “This is gonna hurt. It’s gonna hurt a lot. If you need to scream, you go ahead and do it, sweetheart. Don’t hold back.”

“O-okay.”

“Hey buddy,” Jax coaxed his brother’s gaze to his. “Don’t think about the pain. Just look at me. Okay? Just keep looking at me.”

Tara didn’t give a countdown of warning this time. She did nothing more than signal them to tighten their grips, before she picked up the tweezers from the instrument tray. Melissa took the ultrasound probe in one hand and kept the suction device in the other, providing Tara with a clear view into the wound.

Jax watched Stiles breathing pick up as Tara carefully began rooting around inside his injury. Tears poured out of the kid’s eyes and he bit his bottom lip in an effort to keep from crying out. He struggled against their holds, as Tara said he would. When the pain proved too much for him to bear, he opened his mouth in a silent scream before his eyes rolled into the back of his head.

“Tara?” The panicked lit of Opie’s usually calm tone sent shivers down Jax’s back. “What’s going on?”
“He’s going into shock.”

Scott arrived home before Derek or Peter could return to the clinic with Cora. He caught the Hale’s just as they were exiting the house and he was coming up the front porch.

“Come back inside,” He held the door open for them. “They don’t need you just yet.”

“Why?” Derek asked as they gathered in the living room with the rest of the pack. “What changed?”

“Is Stiles okay?” Lydia questioned, pulling on her jacket as if she were about to head to the clinic to see for herself.

“He went into shock and passed out.” Honestly, it was terrifying to witness. “It took away his choice in the medication matter. Jax told Dr. Knowles and my mom to give Stiles whatever he needed.”

“He must be stable if you’re here.” Chris acknowledged.

“He is stable, but they were still working on him when I left.” Tara had finished removing the splinters and was working on Stiles spleen when Scott forced himself to leave. “Dr. Knowles sent all of us to the waiting room once Stiles was unconscious. I was going to clean up and head back over.”

“Maybe you should wait a while.” Kira advised. “Let his family have this time with him. Go back when he wakes up.”

“Your mom is with him.” Allison reminded him. “You know she won’t leave. She can radio you when it’s a good time to head back over.”

“You’re probably right.” As much as it pained him to stay away, he knew it wouldn’t do anyone any good to crowd the clinic waiting room.

“Oh, before I forget, a guy came through the gate this morning, while you were gone.” Mason mentioned. “He said he used to know you and Stiles.”

“Who?” Almost anyone who knew he and Stiles was either dead or currently occupying the room.

“Theo Raeken.”

“Huh.” There was the barest hint of recollection, but nothing more. “It sounds a little familiar, but it’s not really ringing any bells.”

“He’s at the inn if you want to see him.”

“Maybe I will.” Putting a face to the name might jog his memory. “Later, though. Right now I’m going to shower.”

Jax had been temporarily kicked out of the clinic. Apparently, barging into the examination room every five minutes was distracting. Tara had threatened to put him in a bed next to Stiles and Juice
if he did not let her work in peace. Opie had taken the threat a little too seriously and dragged him out.

He had gone home first. He showered and found a pair of relatively clean clothes to change into. He had stopped by Tara’s jewelry box on the dresser to remove the items that had been placed there for safekeeping, intent on giving them back to their owner later in the day, before heading to Gemma's to check on the boys. He figured if he couldn’t be with his little brother, he needed to be with his sons.

“Daddy!” Thomas grinned brightly as he trudged into the kitchen of his mother’s house. “Hey buddy.” He kissed his youngest son's head in greeting and tried to do the same to his oldest. “Did you bring uncle Stiles and Juice home?” Abel ducked his head to avoid Jax's show of affection. “Grandma said you were going to get them.”

“Your mama is fixing them up right now.” That was about all he would say on the matter to the kids. “And you’re going to be seeing a lot more of them soon.”

“We are?” Thomas bounced excitedly in his seat. “Why?”

“Because they are both grounded.” Jax was not going to let Juice or Stiles out of his sight once they were released from the clinic. “Where’s Grandma?”

“I’m right here.” His mother announced as she came in from the living room. “Boys, go play in the backyard while I talk to your father.”

“Okay!” It didn’t take much cajoling to get the boys up from their chairs and out the door.

“How are Stiles and Juice?” Gemma questioned as she began pouring them both cups of coffee from the pot on the counter.

“Juice has a collapsed lung, a broken foot, and some broken ribs, but Chibs and Dr. Bishop say he’ll make a full recovery.” Although, the Sons refusal to regain consciousness was a concern for the clinic staff. “Tara was debating whether to remove Stiles spleen or repair it, when she threw me out.”

“Were you being a pain in the ass?”

“That’s not how I saw it.” But he could see how others might think that.

“You sure the boys will be okay?” Gemma’s worry over the injured leaked into her tone.

“Tara and Dr. Bishop said they would be.” He had to trust that they were right, their opinions were all he had to go on.

“Tara wouldn’t lie to you about Stiles.” His mother slid a cup of coffee over to him. “You look tired, baby. You should take a nap. You can lay in your grandpa’s room if you want.”

“I’m fine, Mom.” A nap sounded nice but he doubted he could sleep even if he wanted to. “Where is Grandpa, anyway?”

“Blythe took him to the gardens.” Gemma waved a hand in the general direction of the gardens. “He was feeling cooped up.”

“About Blythe, you wanna explain that to me?” He couldn’t really wrap his head around what his
mother had been thinking in regards to Blythe’s job placement. “You and Piney have been very
total about keeping the Bishop’s away from Stiles, but now you’ve got one of them taking care of
Nate on a daily basis.”

“I’m keeping an eye on her,” Gemma always did take that ‘keep your enemies close’ thing to heart.
“I’m controlling whatever contact she has with Stiles. At this point, as far as she knows, he’s my
kid. John died a childless man.”

“It seems cruel.” Keeping an old woman from her only grandson, after she learned of her eldest
son’s death, it was cruel. “What is it with this chick, Ma? She’s got you and Piney putting up all
kinds of walls around Stiles. What did she do? What did she do that was so awful?”

“You know the Stilinski’s grew up in the house next to ours growing up. Johnny and your uncle
Nate were best friends, even had those cans on a string that stretched between the houses, so they
could talk to each other at night.” Gemma chuckled at the memory. “Blythe and your grandma
Rose used to take turns walking Johnny and Nate to school and picking them up. When they were
six, Blythe dropped them off one day and never brought them home.”

“What happened?” Jax asked as he and his mother sat down at the kitchen table. “Where were
they?”

“They were still at the school, sitting on the swings, in the pouring rain.” Gemma pursed her lips.
“Rose brought them home and used the spare key to get into the Stilinski house. Blythe had cleared
out, taken her and Jamie’s things, and bolted.”

“Where did she go?”

“No idea.” She took a long sip of her coffee. “Stilinski’s didn’t have much family, so Johnny
stayed with us.”

“Where was his dad?” Jax had heard about John’s father in passing, even had a few hazy memories
of the man himself. Everyone always said he was a good man. “Why couldn’t he take care of
John?”

“He was still in the VA hospital, recovering from the injuries he got in Vietnam.” Hospitalized for
war wounds was as good as reason as any, he supposed. “He was so shocked to find out that not
only had his wife left, but had taken their youngest boy with her.”

“I’m guessing she never came back?”

“Not even for Henry’s funeral.” Gemma sighed. “I think that’s when Johnny finally stopped
waiting for her to come home.”

“She took Jamie, why not take John too?” How could a mother separate her children, take one, and
leave the other behind?

“I am sure that is a question that John never stopped asking himself.” It was one of the many
things that left a permanent line of sadness on the man’s face. “Those few weeks he stayed with us,
before his daddy was released from the hospital, he asked for his mama, but it was his baby brother
he cried for at night. He could learn to live without his mother, but losing his little brother...”

“It’s like dying.” Jax knew that all too well. He could still remember how it felt to lose Thomas.
He would rather die the worst kind of death than go through that again. “The first time I held
Stiles, John told me he knew what it was like to have a brother out in the world, living a life he
would never be a part of. I thought it meant they had a falling out.”
“If only it were that simple.” Gemma mused, running a hand through her hair. “Chances are Stiles knows that history. If he finds out the woman who hurt his daddy the most has taken up residence in Charming…”

“Right.” That would be a highly combustible situation, which would leave little to no survivors in its wake. “Did she remarry or something? Is that where Bishop came from? Is Stiles going to recognize that name?”

“I think it was her maiden name.” So, there was a good chance Stiles would connect the dots if he were introduced to both Blythe and Jamie. “Let’s not worry about that now. Stiles isn’t going to be up for meeting new people any time soon.”

“That’s true.” Jax ceded through a yawn.

“If you’re not going to take a nap, then at least relax here with the boys.” His mother suggested. “I wanna go to the clinic, check in on the wounded myself.”

“Yeah. Okay.” It would be easier to say away from the clinic if he knew his mother was watching over Stiles. “Radio me if anything changes.”

“I will.”

“Oh, and um,” He took the items he pulled from Tara’s jewelry box out of his kutte pocket and held them out to her. “He should have these back.”

The pain never let up, never dulled. It was intense, all consuming, and agonizing. He couldn’t escape it, even in his sleep. The only way he could rest was when he passed out from exhaustion, and even then, it was a fitful sleep.

Walkers never bothered him when he fell down in the woods and remained unconscious for a few short hours. He figured it was because he was covered in so much of their blood that they thought he was one of them. So long as he didn’t move around much, they left him alone.

He always woke up the same way, every time, with pain in his chest and his father’s voice in his head.

“Stiles, you’ve gotta get up, Son.”

“No.” He moaned, shaking from the searing pain coursing through his body. “C-Can’t.”

The pain was too much. His body was too weak. He had run out of water the previous night and had eaten nothing but a handful of berries since leaving the cliff house days before. He was running on empty, both physically and mentally.

“You read Deaton’s herbal remedy book backward and forward, Stiles. You know exactly what you need treat your burns.” His father sounded so close, as if he was standing right beside him, but Stiles knew that couldn’t be true. “You need to get up and find what you need for the salve. Now, get up, Stiles.”

“I can’t!”

“Yes, you can.” His dad insisted in the same supportive tone he had used when Stiles was doing
physical therapy after his car accident. “You’ve gotten knocked down more times than I could count, Son, but you’ve always gotten back up. You can do it again this time. I know you can. Come on, buddy.”

“O-Okay.” He struggled to his feet, using the tree next to him to leverage himself up, ignoring the sting of the bark biting into the palms of his already mangled hands.

“You’re doing great, Son.” His father praised. “The first few steps are the hardest, but they’ll get easier.”

His father’s encouragement was enough to help him take one-step, then another, but it couldn’t keep him on his feet. The movement sent waves of pain through every nerve ending of his body, causing him to sway dangerously on his feet, feeling dizzy and faint. He collapsed to the forest floor, screaming when his burnt chest made contact with the hard ground.

“Breathe, Stiles.”

“It hurts.” He cried, rolling onto his back to take the pressure off his injuries.

“I know it does, buddy, but you gotta get up and try again.”

“I can’t.” He couldn’t stand, let alone get up and try to walk.

“You’ll die here if you don’t.” His father’s heartbreak and worry washed over him, making his heart constrict painfully in his chest for disappointing him. “You have to get up. You promised me you would do anything you could to survive, so do it, Son.”

“You were still here with me when I made that promise.” It was easy to make that promise when his dad was alive and well, sitting right beside him.

“I’m here now.” Stiles wanted so much to believe that, for his father to be there like he always had been.

“Then help me!” He shouted. “I need you to help me, Dad.”

“I’m trying, Son.”

“It hurts,” He sobbed, tears falling from his eyes. “Make it stop.”

“I would take all your pain away if I could.”

“Do it, please.” He pleaded with his father. “Please, Daddy, make it stop.”

The clinic was quiet for the first time all day. There was nothing but the soft beeping of the heart monitors, slow drip of the IV’s, and scratching of pens against paper to fill the silence.

“Melissa,” Tara’s tired voice greeted her at the receptions desk. “Can I ask a favor?”

“Sure.”

“I wanna go check on Abel and Thomas, and give Jax an update on the kids, tell him it’s safe to come back.” The doctor draped her lab coat over the desk chair. “Chibs went home to shower, but said he’d be back soon. It’ll just be you and Dr. Bishop here. Is that okay?”
“Yeah, that’s fine.” The clinic was closed and the current patients were both in stable condition. It was the optimal time for breaks.

“I promise I will be back in half an hour, probably with Jax right behind me.” The clinic would probably house at least one Son and one Teller at all times while Stiles and Juice were admitted. “You can go home when I get back.”

“Take your time.” She and Bishop could handle whatever problems were thrown their way while the doctor was out.

“Thank you.” Tara smiled gratefully. “Dr. Bishop is keeping an eye on Juice, so if you could look in on Stiles, that would be great. It’s about time to check his vitals again. Oh, fair warning, Gemma’s in there right now.”

“Got it.” Melissa picked Stiles file up off the desk before making her way to the examination room.

They chose to keep the boys together, knowing separating them after such an ordeal would cause them to panic. They kept the gurneys as close to each other as they could, while still leaving room for medical equipment. Gemma was sitting between the beds now, having dragged a chair over from some place.

The SAMCRO matriarch had one hand linked with Juice’s but it was clear her focus was on Stiles. There was a mixture of softness and anguish on her features that Melissa had never seen before. It was a mother looking at her baby who was suffering from something they couldn’t be protected from.

“Nurse McCall,” Dr. Bishop sent her a questioning glance from his spot next to Juice's, where he was scrawling something on the patients chart. “Everything okay?”

“I just came to check Stiles vitals.” She held up the chart. “Dr. Knowles went home to check on her children.”

She gave Gemma a wide berth as she went around Stiles hospital bed. She noted Stiles heart rate and blood pressure in his file, finding one holding steady while the other was still lower than it would be for a healthy individual. His high temperature was a cause for concern, a sign of the infection Tara had already administered antibiotics to treat.

“It hurts, Dad.” Stiles pained voice startled her into nearly dropping the chart and pen.

She froze in place, eyes darting from Stiles to Gemma. The older woman didn’t seem surprised by the boy’s outburst, only somber and resigned.

“He just keeps mumbling that over and over.” Gemma muttered tightly, standing from her chair.

“Make it stop,” Stiles cried out, louder this time. “It hurts, Dad, please.”

“He’s in pain and all he wants is his daddy.” Gemma leaned over the bed to run her fingers through the boy’s hair.

“Daddy, make it stop.” He whined pitifully in his sleep. “Please…”

“He’s on pain killers, yes?” Dr. Bishop asked concernedly.

“Yes.” Melissa had given him the morphine herself. “He shouldn’t be in any pain.”
“Please, Daddy, make it stop.” Stiles arms reached up to claw at his chest.

“His bandages.” Melissa grabbed the hand closest to her, pinning it to the bed before the ministrations could tear away the dressings on his fingertips. “Gemma-“

“Yep.” The older woman was mindful of Stiles damaged digits as she took his hand in hers. “Easy, baby.”

“I thought his wounds were contained to his hands and the upper quadrant of his abdomen.” Bishop abandon Juice’s chart in favor of examining Stiles. “Did Dr. Knowles miss something?”

“There were no new injuries to his chest.” Melissa and Tara had been very thorough in their initial examination of his injuries when he was brought in.

“Maybe it’s internal,” Bishop dragged the blanket down and began pulling back the hospital gown Stiles was wearing. “Nurse McCall, grab the ultrasound machine, please.”

“No.” Gemma reached for the doctor’s hand but was a second too late when the man revealed the scars lining Stiles torso. “It’s not…”

“I see.” He released his grip on the gown.

“It’s old pain, darlin.” Gemma murmured, adjusting the hospital gown and bringing the covers up to hide Stiles scars from sight. “He’s having a nightmare, remembering old injuries.”

“And nearly injuring himself further trying to get away from that old pain.” Bishop inspected the hand Melissa had been holding before she had made a grab for the ultrasound machine. “I’d sedate him if we had anything to sedate him with. He clearly wants his dad, maybe he can calm him down. Is he around?”

“No, he’s not.” Melissa admitted sadly. “He passed away.”

“Well, you’re his mom, right?” Bishop looked to Gemma as if she had all the answers. “Is there something you can do?”

“Maybe.”

Gemma dipped a hand in her pocket and removed a gold star Melissa recognized as John’s badge. She watched Gemma place it delicately in the palm of Stiles hand, curling his fingers around it and resting the fist over his chest. The matriarch fastened a necklace around his throat next, straightening the chain until the ring hanging from it was lying on the boy’s chest.

“There you go, baby.” Gemma kissed his temple soothingly. “There’s your daddy, sweetheart.”

The effect the items had on Stiles was a telling sign of how much they meant to him. The fight left his body, the panic dissipating almost instantly. He whimpered once, a wailing sound of grief rather than physical pain, before he fell into a silent slumber.

By the time Chibs returned to the clinic, Juice was beginning to come around. It started slowly, his eyes fluttering every so often and his limbs twitching. Chibs had been sitting with him for nearly an hour before he finally regained consciousness.

“Hey love,” He stroked the top of the younger man’s hand lightly. “How you feeling?”
“Where’s Stiles?” Juice’s eyes darted back and forth, trying to find the one he was looking for.

“He’s right there.” He nodded to the gurney on the other side of the room. “You can’t really see him, but he’s there.”

Their view of Stiles was restricted by the blond occupying the bed with him. Jax had come in shortly after Chibs had and climbed into bed beside his younger brother. The way he curled around Stiles was probably more for his comfort than Stiles’ but it was a sweet gesture anyway.

“He’s okay?” Juice lifted his head in an attempt to see over Jax.

“Aye. You both are.” They were both in for a considerable amount of time confined to a bed, if he and Tara had their way, but otherwise they would be okay. “Tara and Dr. Bishop expect you to make a full recovery.”

“Awesome.” Juice relaxed at the reassurance, the tension leaking from his body.

“You did good out there, Juicy, keeping you and Stiles alive until we got there.” He commended the younger man on his work outside the walls.

“Stiles got out first, he and Nero. They found me.” Juice picked nervously at the loose thread on his blanket. “They wanted to know where our camp was, but we didn’t tell them. We didn’t tell them anything, I promise.”

“I know, Juicy.” Juice and Stiles would never lead the enemy to their doorstep and put their families in danger. “You did good.”

“They separated us after the first night. The guy who had me, he took my reaper.” He fiddled with the bandage on his forearm where the SAMCRO tattoo once sat. ”He burned it away.”

“It doesn’t mean anything.” It was just ink on his skin. “It can be replaced. Don’t worry about it.”

“I don’t wear my kutte on runs.” He rubbed a hand over the gauze dressing. “It was my reminder.”

“You won’t need a reminder. You won’t be going anywhere else.” Jax declared as he looked over his shoulder to Juice. “You and Stiles are benched, indefinitely.”

“What? Why?”

“You were both captured and tortured.” Jax pointed out the obvious. “Again.”

“It’s not like we did it on purpose.” Juice huffed indignantly. “You don’t trust us out there anymore?”

“I trust you to take care of yourselves when you’re out there. You’ve both proved you’re more than capable of handling yourselves.” Jax untangled himself from his brother and sat up. “It’s the other people out there I don’t trust.”

“I understand if you don’t want Stiles to be ou-“

“I will not put my brother at risk again, by letting him go out there.” History proved that Stiles would fight Jax on that particular rule. “And since the two of you are ‘in love and all that goopy shit,’ as Tig so eloquently put it during the storm, that means you are a package deal. If he’s benched, you are too.”

“That’s not fair.” Juice pouted like a petulant child.
“You’re staying put.” Chibs took Jax’s side on the matter, considering it was his idea to sideline Juice in the first place. “At least until you’re healed. We can talk about it again when you’re back on your feet.”

“We don’t just mean physically either.” Jax added thoughtfully. “You and Stiles just went through hell—”

“We’ve been through worse.”

“We know.” That was part of the reason he and Jax wanted the boys inside the walls, where they would be safe. “Now it’s time to rest. You’ve been out on nearly every run since the beginning, Juicy. Someone else can pick up the slack.”

“Like who?” Juice scoffed at the insinuation that anyone could take his place on the team. “Most of the guys have family here, waiting for them. I don’t. I can take risks out there that they shouldn’t.”

“Except you’ve got family waiting for you too, dumbass.” Jax snapped harshly. “What did I tell you when you asked to prospect, hmm? This club is your goddamn family, it’s your home.”

“I-I know.” Obviously, the younger Son didn’t know shit if he still thought no one prayed for him to come home safely while he was away.

“Your family has spent enough time waiting for you to come home, Juice, and we’re done with it.” Jax confessed wearily. “You are staying put. Is that fucking clear?”

Jax and Chibs gave the younger man a minute, allowed the statement to sink in. Juice seemed to take it in all at once, tears forming in his eyes and the smallest of smiles appearing on his lips as the meaning behind their words became clear. He gave them a brief nod to let them know he’d understood, not trusting himself to speak just yet.

“You’re an idiot if it’s taken you this long to get that, lad.” Chibs clapped the boy on the back of the head gently. “Love you, brother.”

“Love you.”

Stiles woke to a heavy weight against his side that gave off heat like a furnace, a loud snoring in his ear, and a hot breath against his neck. Given the hand gripped firmly around his wrist, he would have guessed Juice had found a way to crawl into bed with him. However, Juice didn’t snore, so that left one person.

“Fucking Jax…” He growled lowly, earning a chuckle from a man in a lab coat seated across the room. “Little help, Doc?”

“Sorry, Mr. Teller,” That was not the way you started a sentence if you were going to help someone. “Your sister-in-law told me to leave him be, unless he was endangering your health.”

“She’s a traitor.” Tara should have been sympathetic toward his plight, she had firsthand knowledge that Jax was an octopus-like cuddler. “And it’s Stilinski, not Teller.”

“What?”
“My last name is Stilinski, not Teller.” He clarified.

“Oh, Mrs. Teller said she was your mother, so I just assumed.”

“Biologically she is, yeah.” While she had been acting a bit more maternal in recent years, he couldn’t really see himself calling Gemma mom any time soon or ever. “Her husband, John Teller, died years before I was born. My dad was a Stilinski.”

“Are you related to the former police chief?” The doctor seemed a little too interested for that to be a simple inquiry. “I’m not trying to pry. It’s just, my mom grew up here. She used to tell me stories about the people she knew here.”

“Henry, Chief Stilinski, was my grandfather.” Henry was a man he had only known through old home movies, pictures, and stories. “He was a friend of your mothers?”

“Something like that. Sh-“ The door of the examination room opening cut off whatever the doctor had to say.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt or anything.” Scott ducked his head in apology as he stepped into the room. “I just wanted to see how you were, Stiles.”

“I’m currently being slow cooked by the bear attached to me.” He made a ‘what can you do’ motion toward his brother. “Actually, I wanted to talk to you, if you don’t mind sticking around for a minute.”

“Yeah. Of course.”

“I’m gonna get a cup of coffee from the break room.” The doctor stood from his chair. “Just yell if you need me.”

“Will do.”

“So,” Scott dropped into the chair beside Stiles bed. “How are you?”

“You already asked that.” He deflected, anxiously caressing the badge that sat in his palm. “I’m okay.”

“That’s…” Scott cleared his throat, eyeing the trinket Stiles held close. “That was your dads.”

“Yeah.” Tara was supposed to be looking after it for him. He wasn’t sure when she had returned it. “Um, look, I, uh, I wanted to thank you.”

“For what?”

“For coming with my brothers and Chibs to rescue me and Juice.” His eyes flickered to the man sleeping peacefully in the bed a few feet away. “Thanks.”

“Oh, that was no problem.” The alpha brushed off his gratitude. “Any of the pack would have gone.”

“Yeah, but I don’t think just any of them would have taken a bullet for my brother.” That was exactly what Scott had done, and Stiles couldn’t get it off his mind. “You knew that you would heal, but I think you would have done it even if you couldn’t.”

“I would have.”
“Doing that for Jax, for my big brother,” He felt Jax’s arms tighten around him as he choked up, as if the older man could sense his distress. “It means everything to me. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”
Even without his werewolf senses, Peter would have been able to catch the heavy scent of marijuana permeating through the small examination room. Of course, without the smell, Stiles’ oh-so-relaxed state gave away his recent activities, as did the bong sitting on the tray beside him.

“It’s medicinal.” Stiles roommate, Juice, claimed as he took a hit from a joint.

“Uh huh.” Peter resisted an eye roll as he and his nephew turned their focus to the person they were there to visit. “Stiles, you’re looking better.”

“Peter, Derek.” The younger man reared up, latching onto Peter’s forearm. “I’m not sure why you’re here-“

“You told Melissa to radio us, so we could come down to see you.” Peter reminded him.

“Oh, well, I wanted to tell you something.” Stiles used his grip on Peter’s arm to pull him close, until they were nose-to-nose. “Peter, you are my favorite psychopath. Yes, you are. My favorite.”

“How sweet. You, Stiles,” Peter whispered as if they were sharing a secret. “You are so high right now.”

“I don’t think the beds that far off the ground.” Stiles leaned over the side of the gurney to check the distance for himself, nearly topping off it.

“Idiot.” Derek grabbed him by the shoulder and dumped him back onto the bed before he could hit the floor.

“Sourwolf!” Stiles exclaimed with a bright grin. “I’ve something to say to you too!”

“Oh, this ought to be good.” Peter chuckled.

“You,” Stiles took a handful of Derek’s shirt in his fist. “You are the only one in the pack that I trust to have my back if things get hairy. Out of all the pack, you are the one I trust.”

“Why?” Derek questioned, looking as if he had been slapped in the face not given a compliment.

“You don’t claim to be anything but what you are.” Stiles released his grip on Derek’s shirt and laid back against his pillows. “Thanks.”

“That’s what he called you here for.” Juice said as Stiles dozed off. “He wanted to thank you for coming with the club to Sacramento. You didn’t have to do that, but you did. Thank you.”

“He’s pack and you’re his.” Derek shrugged as if that as that explained everything. “That’s all that
matters.”

Jax had let his duties slide since Juice and Stiles had come home. He’d been spending so much time at the clinic, and so little time with the club, that he had no idea what was going on with SAMCRO or Charming. The day the boys seemed more alert than before, he headed to the General Store, where the majority of the club members were supposed to be inventorying the new food stock.

“Holy shit.” His eyes roamed the piles upon piles of canned goods filling up the storage room at the back of the store.

“There’s more in the truck outside.” Tig informed him as he hauled in another box. “And in the Jeep.”

“It’ll definitely last through winter.” They would still ration it out, to be safe, but the current inventory would keep them well fed until spring. “Did you grab the shit from the theater?”

“Bobby took it to Pinney so they could go through it.” The Son told him, dropping the box, and kicking it away. “That church was a bust, though. Nothing but dead bodies and bibles.”

“Huh.” Either they had gone to the wrong church or someone had beaten them to the supplies left in it. “Where is everyone?”

“Opie took a team into St. Thomas for a med-run.” That would account for a good portion of the club. “Everyone else is where they’re supposed to be, doing their usual jobs.”

“Good.” Things were returning to normal, finally.

“Went by the clinic this morning to drop off some medicinals for the boys.” Tig brought two pinched fingers up to his mouth and made a puffing sound to signify what type of medicine he was plying the kids with. “They seem better.”

“They are.” Tara and Bishop had removed the tube from Juice’s chest and had gotten Stiles up and walking around. “Can’t keep those two down long.”

“They do tend to bounce back pretty quickly after getting smacked down.” Tig mused.

“How’s Nero and his group doing?” Jax hadn’t had a chance to speak to them for more than a few minutes since they came through the gate. “Heard you’ve been showing his girl around.”

“Venus? Yeah…” The other man grinned coyly. “She’s great. I’ve been helping her settle in, making sure no one messes with her.”

“Has there been any problems?” He was aware that Venus was not a woman in the traditional sense, and people could be cruel about things like that, but Jax had absolutely no intention of letting anyone in Charming get away with treating another person like crap because of their gender or sexuality.

“No. I mean, I’m sure people talk, but they do that about anyone that’s a little different.” There was always gossip, but people tended to get tight-lipped when someone wearing a kutte was in the general vicinity. “Mason hasn’t given any of them jobs yet. I think he’s waiting for Stiles to come back to work.”
“What about that other kid that came in?” Jax hadn’t met or seen the teenager who had come in while they were in Sacramento, and it made him nervous. “Where’s he at?”

“The inn. He doesn’t seem eager to get into a house or apartment.” So, it was possible he didn’t plan to stick around. “He told Mason he’d help out with the CC team if they needed it, but other than that he’s kept himself behind closed doors.”

“Hmm.”

“Hey Jax,” A young brunette woman, whom Jax recognized as a Beacon Hills native, traipsed into the room.

“Hey, uh…” He prided himself on knowing the names of Charming citizens, but he was drawing a blank with her. “I’m sorry.”

“Caitlin.” She supplied for him. “I work in the library.”

“Right.” He remembered now, she worked in the library with her girlfriend Emily. “Something I can help you with?”

“A guy named Jamie Bishop keeps coming into the library to access public records, anything with the name Stilinski in it.” She handed a file folder to him. “That’s all the stuff he’s made copies of. I thought you would want to know.”

“Isn’t Bishop that new doctor?” Tig questioned as Jax rooted through the papers.

“Yep.”

The bundles of papers in the folder were old newspaper clippings. There was one from the sports section that read ‘Charming High School Varsity Baseball Team Wins State Championships,’ accompanied by a photo of a young John Stilinski in full baseball uniform smiling brightly with his teammates. The front-page headline about Charming’s former chief of police, Henry Stilinski’s, untimely death in the line of duty was buried in the middle of the stack, as if Bishop couldn’t bring himself to look at it. It was the announcement page dated April of 1996 that caught Jax’s eye.

“Oh fuck.”

“What?” Tig snatched the newspaper clipping from his hands and read the words aloud. “‘Stilinski, John and Teller, Gemma, a son, Monday, April 08, 1996, St. Thomas Memorial Hospital of Charming.’ Why does this guy have such a hard-on for baby bro?”

“He’s Stiles’ uncle.” And now the doctor knew it. “The Bishop’s are Stilinski’s.”

“Rur roh.”

Gemma was beginning to enjoy her mornings at the diner. Ever since Tig introduced her to one of the newcomers, Nero Padilla, she had been showing up earlier so she could share breakfast with the man before the morning rush started.

“You wanna come for a walk with me later?” She skimmed a finger over the top of his hand. “I’ll show you the gardens, and maybe you can come back to my place for dinner.”
“Sounds good, mama.” He smiled softly. “I gotta tell you, I still can’t wrap my head around all this. This place being here, the way it is, in this world, it’s unbelievable.”

“To be honest, when we came back to Charming, we were only going to clear out the clubhouse and a few other buildings.” There was never any plan to take back the whole town. “Then my youngest came home-“

“Stiles?”

“Yeah. He’d been on the road a while, had seen other people, kids, out there on their own with no place to go, and decided they should have a safe place to call home.” Stiles was a bleeding heart, just like his father, he just hid it better. “He convinced Jax and, well, all of us, that the only way the world had a chance of going back to normal, was if we maintained some kind of society.”

“And you did it, are doing it,” Nero glanced around the diner approvingly. “It’s amazing, really.”

“My boys put their heads together and they can do anything.”

“One of those boys would be my grandson,” Blythe’s voice boomed in her ears. “Isn’t that right?”

“Nero, would you excuse me?” Gemma leaned over to kiss the man’s cheek. “I need to take care of this.”

“Rain check on that walk.” Nero said as stood form the booth. “I’ll see you later.”

“Have a seat, Blythe.” Gemma gestured to the empty side of the table once Nero was out of sight. “Tell me what’s going on.”

“What’s going on…?” The older woman huffed as she slid into the booth. “I have a grandchild, a grandson. You told me John didn’t have any children.”

“He has the one son. I know that because I gave birth to him.” She ignored the way Blythe’s face scrunched up in disgust at her admission. “But that doesn’t mean he’s your grandson.”

“John was my son, his chil-“

“You stopped being his mother when he was six years old.” She lost her right to call herself John’s mother the day she walked away. “You’ve got no claim to his boy.”

“That is not your choice.” Blythe smacked her palm down on the table. “I’m his damn mother.” Gemma may not have claimed him as her son for the first eight years of his life, but at least she had been present, which is more than she could say for Blythe. “I will protect him from anyone who could cause him pain.”

“I don’t want to hurt him, Gemma.” She sighed. “I just want to know him.”

“You want to tell him who you are.” The old woman was under the mistaken impression that it would mean something profound to Stiles. “That is a very bad idea. And before you say, again, that you’re not going to hurt him, you should know that it is you I’m protecting in this.”

“What does that mean?”

“Stiles and Johnny shared a very close and special bond. There is no one in the world Stiles loves more than his daddy.” That became clear every time the boy cried out for John in his sleep, held his badge in his hands, or wore his wedding ring around his neck. “You abandon his father, he
knows that. He knows his father did not have to be an orphan at seventeen. You could’ve stepped up and come back but you didn’t.”

“I have regretted my decisions, in regards to John and Henry, every single day since I left.” That didn’t stop her from staying away.

“Your regrets won’t mean shit to Stiles, not when he saw the damage your abandonment did to John.” Stiles had recognized the signs because he had been abandon himself, and Gemma had her own regrets about that. “That kid is not going to welcome you with open arms. You are never going to be his grandma any more than I will ever really be his mama.”

“What does that mean?” Another repetition of ‘what does that mean’ was surely about to fall from Blythe’s lips, but she stopped herself in favor of another question. “What about Jamie? He didn’t even know he had a brother until a few weeks ago when he wanted to know why I wanted to go to Beacon Hills so badly.”

“Jesus.” That must have been one hell of a shock to Jamie. “Stiles maybe a little more lenient to Jamie, but now is not that time to test that theory. He’s not in the right frame of mind to deal with family drama.”

“I know what he’s been through. Jamie has been working at the clinic. He switches shifts with Dr. Knowles.” Yes, Gemma had seen the younger Bishop there when she went to check on the boys. “He knows Stiles is his nephew. He’s known since Stiles told him his last name. He found the birth announcement in the newspaper archives to confirm it.”

“Do you think he can keep his mouth shut about it for the time being?” Stiles was in no shape to have that kind of bomb dropped on him.

“He’ll take his patients wellbeing into account before he says anything.” That had to count for something, seeing as Stiles was one of his patients. “I’ll talk to him, make sure he understands the situation.”

“I would appreciate that.” It would be the first right decision Blythe had made for her family in over forty years. “Look, darlin, I didn’t lie about Stiles parentage to be a bitch. I was taking care of my baby.”

“And was Piney taking care of him too?” The betrayal Blythe felt wasn’t entirely unwarranted. Piney had been her friends once too.

“Piney is very protective of Stiles. The relationship he and Stiles have is the one Stiles should have had with Henry.” Stiles called the old man ‘uncle’ but in reality, Piney was more of a grandfather to him. “He lied for the same reason I did. Since he is the one Stiles is going to turn to when the truth finally comes out, he should be the one to decide when that truth is told.”

“Fine.”

Stiles woke up feeling a little more present than he had before. The morphine and weed were starting to wear off. The aches from the sutures in his abdomen were making themselves known, as well as the migraine pulsing at his temples. The pain in his head was only made worse by the sound of an infant wailing.

“What the fuck?” He peeled his eyes open, coming face-to-face with Juice in the bed next to him.
“Is there a baby?”

“Yep.” Juice nodded to Tara who was standing between the gurneys with a bundle cradled in her arms. “She won’t tell me why it’s here.”

“I was waiting for you to wake up, so I could talk to you both.” The doctor explained. “I wanted to introduce you to this little guy.”

“Oh, okay.” That wasn’t strange behavior at all. “Why?”

“Well, because,” She grinned widely at the two of them and held the baby up like an offering to the gods. “Congratulations, it’s a boy.”

“No.” He and Juice shut her down in unison.

“Why not?” Tara asked, hushing the baby as he continued to cry. “You guys are great with kids.”

“That doesn’t mean we want any.” Stiles reasoned, staring at the kid like he was a ticking time bomb about to go off.

“Where are his parents?” Juice brought up an important question. “I don’t remember anyone in town being pregnant.”

“He’s the baby Jax and Opie found in the car trunk.” Tara replied somberly. “His parents are dead. He needs a family.”

“So find him one.” It couldn’t be that hard. Surely, there were a number of families in Charming willing to welcome a new member.

“I have.” She waved a hand between them. “You’re both compassionate and caring. You’re in a committed relationship. You-“

“Stiles,” Juice ducked his head and peered at Stiles through his lashes. “I love you, but I think our relationship is moving too fast.”

“Yes. I agree.” He nodded enthusiastically before leveling Tara with a grim frown. “We can’t very well bring a baby into a broken home.”

“Oh, for the love of….” Tara smacked her free hand to her forehead.

“Oh, for the love of….” Tara smacked her free hand to her forehead.

“I guess this means the wedding’s off.” Stiles joked to his lover.

“Well, it was a nice idea anyway.”

“What wedding?” Tara’s eyes darted from Juice to Stiles and back again.

“It’s an inside joke. Don’t worry about it.” Stiles waved off her curiosity. “Tara, we are both stuck in hospital beds. How do you expect us to take care of a baby?”

“Mary and Piney will continue to look after him until the both of you are physically able.” Tara revealed who she had pawned the infant off on originally. “He doesn’t have to live with you forever, okay? Just give it a try, please. A couple of weeks, that’s all I ask.”

“A couple of weeks to get us emotionally attached.” Oh yeah, he could see what game the good doctor was playing. “How very manipulative of you.”
“She’s spent way too much time with Gemma.” Juice noted, earning a glare from the woman. “What’s his name?”

“You’ll take him?” She asked hopefully.

“Temporarily.” Stiles could not stress that word enough. “We don’t have any baby stuff.”

“I’ll take care of that, don’t worry.” Tara assured them with a smile. “The note the parents left didn’t give a name. Mary and Piney have been calling him baby and little man.”

“Well, he’s gonna need a name.” Everyone was entitled to a name. “Juice, give him a name.”

“Why do I have to do it?”

“Hey kids,” Chibs announced his presence as he barreled into the room with a duffle bag slung over his shoulder. “Brought the goodies you asked for.”

“We asked for those last night.” Stiles grumbled, unplugging the tubing of the IV from the catheter in his arm, and climbing out of bed.

“I’m sorry, you ungrateful shithead, but I needed a few hours shut eye.” The Scot muttered, dropping the bag on the now vacant gurney. “I still don’t know why you wanted the clothes. You can’t go anywhere.”

“They get me out of the flimsy hospital gown.” He pawed at the zipper on the bag until he could successfully peel it open, finding jeans and a t-shirt. “No sweats?”

“I couldn’t find any sweats for you.” Chibs shrugged. “I did grab that wristwatch from your trinket box. I don’t know why you wanted it, it’s broken.”

“It’s not for me.” He left the watch in the bag and walked to the adjoining bathroom. “Thank you.”

“Juicy, the things you wanted are in here too.” Chibs patted the bag. “I’ll check on you boys a little later. I’m helping out at the farm for a bit today, so I gotta get going. Congrats on the new baby, by the way.”

“Fuck you.” Juice flipping Chibs off was the last thing Stiles saw before he closed the door, cutting off his view of the exam room.

In the privacy of the bathroom, Stiles was able to shimmy out of the hospital gown, discarding it into the makeshift hamper. Bending over to step into his jeans took far more effort than it was probably worth. Trying to drag them up his legs was impossible, too much movement pulled at his stitches, causing him to flinch.

“Son of a bitch…” He wrapped an arm around his torso as he curled in on himself.

“Stiles?” Tara rapped her knuckles against the door. “Are you okay?”

“Uh, y-yeah,” He stuttered. “Um, just for reference, Juice can’t get out of bed or bend over, right?”

“He’s not up for sex right now, Stiles.” The heavy exasperation in her tone was seriously uncalled for.

“Neither am I. Jesus.” Not everything was about sex for fucksake. “I need help.”

“Okay. I’m coming in.” That was the only warning he received before the door began opening.
“No!” He slammed a hand against it to force it closed. “Not you.”

“I can get Melissa, she—“

“No!” If he didn’t want his sister-in-law then he sure as hell didn’t want a woman who had acted as a surrogate mother to him for years. “Um…”

“Jax is in the office talking to Dr. Bishop. Do you want me to get him?”

“Yes. Jax is good. Yeah.” Jax was a hell of a lot better of an option than one of the women. “Thanks.”

While he waited for his brother, Stiles took in his appearance in the mirror above the sink. There were dark bags beneath his eyes from a lack of a proper, restful, sleep. The bruise on his cheek was beginning to fade and the swelling of his jaw had gone down. The layers of gauze covering his initial wound and the incision from his splenectomy on his abdomen held red stains from blood seeping through his sutures. He looked like absolute hell.

“Hey buddy,” Jax pushed the door open and stepped into the small lavatory before Stiles could really react. “What’s going on?”

“I, um…” He pointed to the pants around his ankles. “Don’t be a dick about this, please.”

“Chill, kiddo, I gotcha.” Jax leaned down to pull Stiles jeans up to his hips. “See? No dick moves.”

“I’ve got it from here.” He tried in vain to grip the zipper of his jeans, but the bulky bandages on his fingertips proved to be more of a hindrance than he had previously thought. “God damn it.”

“Let me do it.”

“No.” Stiles whined, taking an unconscious step backward. “I can do it.”

“Obviously, you can’t.” Jax batted his hands away and made quick work of the button on the jeans. “What’s the big deal? I helped you get dressed when you were little.”

“I’m not little anymore.” Having his big brother zip his fly was a special kind of humiliating. “I can dress my damn self. If my fingers weren’t so…”

“I know. Lift your arms.” Jax instructed so he could slide the shirt over Stiles head, careful not to put strain on his injuries. “If we ever come across the guy who did this, I’ll cut off all his god damn fingers, to start with.”

“Start with his tongue, rip it out of his mouth.” The guy who had tortured him had liked to talk, that task would be difficult without a tongue. “Then pull out all his teeth. Then move on to his fingers.”

“I’ll do that.” Jax agreed, straightening out Stiles shirt. “I’m seeing a problem with your outfit here, little brother.”

“What is it?” Stiles asked as he opened the door and made his way back through the room, Jax following behind him.

“You can’t work the button or zipper. How are you going to use the toilet?” His brother inquired, helping him into bed, covering him with the blankets and all.

“It’s all Chibs could find. I don’t exactly have any leisure clothing.” All the clothing in his
position were things that could hold up to wear and tear.

“Maybe you can bring him a pair of your sweats, honey.” Tara suggested as she unceremoniously placed the baby in Stiles arms, not giving him a moment to say no. “Support his head.”

“I know how to hold a baby.” He grumbled, fixing his hold so the infant was resting more on his forearms, taking the pressure off his hands. “Why are you giving him to me right now?”

“You and Juice need to bond with him and Juice fell asleep, so you’re up.” Tara re-attached the tubing of his IV as she spoke. “You okay?”

“Yes.” He grinned to prove it. “Hey, since I’m feeling so much better today, maybe you can let me go home.”

“No.” She shot him down immediately. “And do not even think about going out that bathroom window tonight during shift change. Chibs told me about you and Juice’s little escape attempt last night.”

“You can’t fault us for trying, you’ve had us locked up here for a week.” They were going stir crazy to say the least. “I know he has to stay, but I’m good to go. I can take care of myself.”

“You couldn’t even pull up your pants.” Jax reminded him helpfully.

“What are going to do? Keep me here until my hands heal?” There was no way in hell that was going to fly. “Be realistic about this. You can’t actually keep me here against my will.”

“Try me.” Tara challenged.

“You are wasting valuable resources on me.” Aside from the antibiotics, he could survive without the medications they were giving him. “It’s not like I’ll be going very far. I’ll come in every day, twice a day, for checkups.”

“How about this.” The devilish smirk on Jax’s face did not bode well. “You can go, but you have to stay with Mom, so she can keep an eye on you.”

“Why can’t I just go home? Chibs will be there.” It’s not like he would be unsupervised.

“Chibs takes the night shift here, you know that. So, you either keep your ass in that bed or you go to Gemma’s.” Jax laid out his options.

“Fine. I’ll stay with Gemma.” Stiles took far too much pleasure in wiping the smug look off his brother’s face.

“Damn it, Jax.” Tara admonished her husband. “I wanted to keep him here at least one more night.”

“That was my bad.” Jax hung his head in shame. “I didn’t think he would actually go for it.”

“I’m free!” Stiles whooped.

“Stiles-“

“No take-backs!” He interrupted the doctor before she could protest. “You have to check me out.”

“You have to wait until Gemma get’s off work, so you might as well get comfortable.” Jax fiddled with his pillows, fluffing them up like a proper mother hen would. “I’m gonna go talk to her, let her know what’s going on.”
“Okay.”

“I need to get some paperwork done.” Tara picked up Stiles chart from the tray beside the bed and noted a few things in it. “I’ll send in Melissa to change that IV. Are you okay with the baby for now?”

“Yeah, we’re fine.” The infant was sleeping as soundly as Juice. “I’ll yell for you if there’s a problem.”

“Okay.”

As his brother and sister-in-law trudged out of the room, Stiles turned his attention to the baby. The kid had a head of dark hair that was soft beneath the palm of his hand. He was too small for the onesie he was dressed in, but he looked healthy, and that was all that really mattered.

He wasn’t sure what the hell was going through Tara’s mind when she decided it would be a good idea for he and Juice of all people to take care of the baby. Yes, they were good with kids, the Winston and Teller kids loved them, but they weren’t exactly parent material. And despite Tara saying the baby would only be with them for a few weeks, he knew for a fact she was hoping the infant would end up with a Stilinski and Ortiz hyphenate at the end of whatever name they chose for him.

“Stiles?”

“Hmm?” He lifted his gaze from the infant to see Melissa next to his bed, changing out the IV bag. “Oh, hey, I’m glad you’re here.”

“You are?” She raised her brows in surprise. “Are you stoned again? Derek and Peter mentioned something about that this morning.”

“No, I’m not stoned.” He flushed red with embarrassment, remembering the morning’s events. “I have something for you. It’s in the duffle by my feet, side pocket.”

The older woman finished replacing the IV bag before looking to the duffle. She reached a hand into the open side pocket and quickly found the item Stiles had asked Chibs to bring.

“Oh.” She held the trinket delicately in her hands. “My watch, the one Rafael gave me. How do you have this?”

“I was passing through St. Helens. I came across a scavenger camp.” He hadn’t intended to confront the group, but the sounds had left him with no other choice. “I heard screaming and I went to help.”

“Oh.” She held the trinket delicately in her hands. “My watch, the one Rafael gave me. How do you have this?”

“Stiles?”

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“Of course you did.” She said it so easily, as if she could imagine no other scenario, but honestly, it was not that simple.

Stiles had not wanted to rescue anyone, because no one had rescued him. There was something about being left on your own, with no one to care for you or to care about, that stripped away your empathy. It was only the feel of his father’s badge sitting heavily in his pocket, and the knowledge of what he would do in a similar situation, that had Stiles moving toward the danger instead of away from it.

“The scavengers had a family. The son, daughter, and father were chained up by the fire. They had the mother on the ground.” There had been one man on top of her, another laughing beside him with a gun pointed at the husband, and two armed men surrounding the area, chatting about who
would get a turn with her next. “I did what I had to do to help.”

He took the first guy out quietly, a knife to the back of his skull before he even realized Stiles was there. The body dropping to the ground alerted the others, and he lost valuable time snatching the man’s gun. The only reason he was able to shoot the second perimeter guard, was because the daughter being held captive had created a diversion. She had kicked the man closest to her in the shin twice, causing him to lose his balance and fall into the campfire. Taking out the man on top of the mother was easy enough after that.

“I was going through the scavengers things, looking for anything I could use, when I found your watch.” It was tossed away in a sack full of mismatched pieces of jewelry, souvenirs from the scavengers previous victims. “I knew it was yours, because it still had the specks of paint on the band, from when you helped Scott and me with a school project.”

“I never could get all the orange paint off of it.” Melissa smiled fondly. “Not that I minded. It’s the hazard of being a parent.”

“Yeah.” He supposed it was. “Look, I’m not going to presume to know what happened to you.”

“Stiles-“

“To get that watch off your wrist, the scavengers had to have had you.” He cringed at his own wording, knowing there could have been a better way phrase that particular statement. “Groups like that don’t just pull guns, say ‘give me your shit’ and let you walk away. I saw what they were doing to that mother, what they would have done to the rest of that family before they killed them.”

“I didn’t let them hurt anyone else while they had us.” The ‘anyone else’ struck him, implying she wasn’t the only member of the group to be taken by the scavengers. “We got away. That is all that matters. And Scott, he doesn’t know anything about what went on there.”

“How can he not know?”

“We were held up in an old store, we thought it was safe. He and some of the pack went on a big supply run, looking for gas and food. Only four of us stayed behind to pack up our camp so we could head out when they got back.” The four of them were left vulnerable while the majority of the group was off gathering supplies. “They were gone maybe an hour before the scavengers attacked.”

“They were watching you.” They were waiting for the right moment to make their move.

“They didn’t move us. They kept us there, for hours. It was all so much that I don’t…- I’m not even sure how we got away.” She cleared her throat as her voice grew hoarse. “We hid a few miles away, in an old library. We only went back when we heard the cars the pack had taken. When they saw things were missing, we told them scavengers came through, took what supplies we had on hand and left. They don’t know anything other than that. Stiles, I do not want Scott to know about any of it.”

“I won’t tell him.” He promised, wanting to offer her some kind of comfort but knowing physical touch, even one as innocent as a hug, would not be welcomed right now. “I’m sorry if I brought up bad memories. I just know how easy it is for things to get pushed back when you’re fighting for your life on the road. Now that you’re settled, if you need to talk about it with someon-“

“Honey, I appreciate the offer, but –“

“Not to me!” Second to Scott, he was probably the last person she wanted to speak to about that
kind of trauma. “Gemma. I was gonna suggest Gemma.”

“Gemma?” The ‘are you fucking serious’ was left unsaid but written all over her face.

“I know she’s not really approachable, but, um, she’s been there.” He was probably overstepping all kind of bounds telling Melissa that. “It happened before the world went to hell. She’s had time to deal with it, I guess. So, if you need to talk to someone about what happened to you, she’ll listen, she’ll understand. I just thought you should have the option.”

“Thank you.”

The inn could somehow look welcoming and creepy at the same time, depending on how many people were staying there. Shivers crawled up the back of Scott’s neck as he stepped into the empty lobby, the eeriness of it giving him the heebie-jeebies.

“Uh, hello?” The alpha’ voice boomed through the dim room. “Anyone here?”

“Right here, dude.” A man around his age came bounding down the hallway. “Can I help you?”

“Mason said you were asking for me.” Well, if using his name to get into Charming counted as asking. “I’m Scott Mc-“

“McCall! Scott McCall,” The other man grinned, familiarity dancing in his eyes. “You don’t remember me, do you?”

“Not really, no.” He replied apologetically.

“Theo Raeken.” He already knew the guy’s name, Mason had given it to him, but it did nothing to help him remember who he was. “You, me, and Stiles went to school together. We were all friends. I moved away in fourth grade.”

“Oh! Oh right.” He had the vaguest recollection of the man or at least of the kid he used to be. “How are you?”

“I’m good, man. I mean, now that I’m here I’m good.” He gestured to the room. “This place is great. How’d you end up here?”

“Stiles’ brother Jax is from here, so when we heard it was still a town, that it hadn’t become a dead zone, I knew my group could find sanctuary here.” Scott offered him a small chunk of the story, not feeling comfortable enough to spew the full dirty history. “How about you?”

“I was headed north from Sacramento and I ran into Stiles. He told me to come up this way.” It sounded too simple, almost like a lie, nothing as dramatic as the story Nero and Braeden had told to gain entry into Charming. “How is he? Still out on a run?”

“He’s been back for days.” There wasn’t any kind of town-wide announcement when Stiles and Juice returned, mainly because they didn’t want well-wishers clogging up the waiting room of the clinic.

“Oh.” The sour note in Theo’s scent was a little off-putting, but Scott chose to ignore it for now.

“So, um, we should hang out, catch up.” It had been a long time since fourth grade, they would have to get to know each other again. “Maybe once you get settled in, with a job and a house, you
can come over for dinner. I would ask you tonight, but it’s been a long day at the farm and I kinda just want to go home and crash.”

“I’d like that, but I’m not sure I’m gonna stay.” His shoulders slumped in defeat. “I’ve been on the road a long time. Charming, a whole town, it’s kind of a lot. I’m not sure I’m ready for it.”

“We weren’t sure about it either.” It was natural to be nervous about rejoining a world that did not revolve around killing to survive. “But we’re giving it a chance. We’re learning to live as people again. You should give it a try, even if it’s just for a little while.”

“Maybe I will.”

Gemma kept her bedroom door open at night so she could hear if anything was amiss. Normally, it was to ensure Nate hadn’t wandered off in the middle of the night and to listen for the telltale sounds of her grandsons sneaking into the living room to watch a movie when they stayed over. Tonight, it was to keep an ear out for Stiles.

Her youngest fell asleep on the living room couch shortly before dinner. He hadn’t stirred when Tara stopped by to check on him or when Jax had changed him out of jeans and into sweatpants. The most he had done in hours was twitch.

The whimpering started not long after Gemma had gone to bed. The soft cries followed, although they did not last long. Something must have woken him, a noise or a nightmare, because soon after the cries ceased he was up and pacing around the house.

He passed by her bedroom more than once, hesitating outside the door every so often. He used to do the same thing when he was little and stayed the night when Jax was called away on club business. He would knock his tiny fist against the doorframe, complain about a bad dream, and ask to lay with her. She always denied him. Those nights ended when he was eight, learned she was his mother, and stopped looking to her for any kind of affection. Of course, it had been quite some time since then and their relationship had changed considerably.

“Stiles,” She called out in a hushed whisper, so not to disturb her father who was sleeping down the hall. “Come here, baby.”

“What?” He stalled in the doorway, shifting awkwardly on his feet.

“Come on.” She pulled the blankets back and patted the bed. “You can’t get comfortable on the couch, that’s why you’re up.”

“That’s not why I’m…” He scrubbed a hand down his face. “I don’t, um…”

“You can go lay with Grandpa.” Although Nate might be a little shocked to wake up with someone lying beside him. “You’re too big for Abel and Thomas’s beds. You can go back to the couch if you want, but you need to get some sleep.”

She rolled onto her side, facing the wall, effectively putting her back to him. The nonchalance gave him the illusion that she wouldn’t give two fucks what he did. It took the pressure off, made him think a little less about the decision he made.

It still took her by surprise when he chose to crawl into bed next to her. When Jax was a kid and climbed into bed with her, he would flop right down, not caring where he landed or if he elbowed
anyone in the process. Stiles was careful in his movements, as if he was afraid to jostle her.

“Nightmares are expected after what you and Juice went through.” She turned back over to face him, pulling the blankets up to his chest once he had stretched out. “Nothing to be ashamed of.”

“It’s not nightmares.” He sighed sadly. “It’s not only nightmares.”

“You can tell me.” They didn’t really do that, share personal things with one another, but that didn’t mean they couldn’t. “If you want to.”

“I keep remembering my dad.” He said tentatively, voice sounding strained. “But not when he was alive.”

“What does that mean?”

“After he died, when I was on the road, the pain would get so bad that I wanted it to kill me.” He admitted morosely. “Every time I was ready to let it, I would hear Dad’s voice in my head, telling me to get up and keep going.”

“You needed a reason to survive.” Given his circumstances, injured, alone, and orphaned, it was amazing he survived at all. “What’s a better reason than your daddy telling you to?”

“I guess I’m not sure why I keep remembering him that way, instead of when he was alive.” Stiles mumbled, breath hitching. “I keep trying to picture him working in his office at the sheriff’s station or cheering at one of the baseball games he would take me to, but I can’t. It’s like all the memories of before are gone. They’re just not there.”

“You remember your Grandma Rose?”

“Unfortunately.” He shivered at the memories of Gemma’s mother.

“She wasn’t always so…angry.” Gemma’s mother had not been perfect in any shape, way, or form, but she had been loving and tender when Gemma was a girl. It was only when her brother’s health declined that things changed. “After Nathaniel died, she closed herself off. She couldn’t handle the grief of losing a child. She lost everything that made her a good mother.”

“I’m sorry.”

“When Jax was little, he asked her to tell him a story about his uncle Nathaniel. She could not come up with a single one that didn’t involve him in a hospital bed.” It was heartbreaking to watch her mother rack her brain for a happy memory of Nathaniel. “There were pictures on the walls of him playing little league, dressed in costume for a church pageant, singing in the choir. She could look at those photos for hours and not recall a moment from them. She could only remember the bad things.”

“Why?” Stiles asked desperately.

“She could not accept that Nathaniel was dead.” Without the ability to let go of her son, Rose was stuck in the anger stage of grief. “She knew, logically, that he was gone, just like you know that your dad is gone. She couldn’t see past Nathaniel in that hospital bed, and you-”

“Can’t see past my dad lying on the front lawn of the cliff house.” A soft sob escaped the boy’s lips. “I don’t want to be Rose.”

“Then you gotta let it go, baby.” She caressed her fingers through his hair. “Accepting his death
doesn’t mean forgetting him. It’s putting him to rest, allowing yourself to move on.”

“I don’t know if I can move on.” Stiles confessed. “How did you after losing Thomas?”

”There’s not a day that goes by that I don’t think about my Thomas.” The son she had lost never strayed far from her mind. “When I think about him, it’s not heart monitors and wires. It’s his smile and his laugh. If you want the good memories, sweetheart, you gotta let go of the bad.”

Charming’s security system was good but not flawless. The walls, for instance, were not heavily guarded. There were two guards at the gate and two on the wall at the south end of town. One guard from each side would do long walks around the perimeter multiple times throughout their shifts. It still left plenty of blind spots, points of entry or exit if you were patient enough.

Theo had no intention of scaling the walls. If he wanted to leave, he would walk out the gate, but that might raise some red flags. He just needed to get to the perfect spot, one that put him within radio-range of the crew he left in the woods a few miles outside of town.

“Donovan, you read me?” He spoke into the walkie-talkie as he ducked into a dark corner by the wall.

“Yeah.” The other man responded. “It’s been a week, man. Tell me we’re doing this soon.”

“Mid-morning, tomorrow.” Everyone would be out and about, getting breakfast and heading to work, it would ensure maximum damage and causalities. “You take out the team they send out to deal with the biters built up outside the walls. I’ll take care of the guards at the gate. You’ll be able to walk right in. Just be ready.”

“We’ll be ready.”
Stiles woke up to sun shining in his face from the window and an empty bed. He was thankful for the latter and cursed the former as he sat up and wiped the crust of sleep from him eyes. He pushed the blankets off and climbed out of bed, groaning as the movement pulled at his stitches.

He noted sound of water running in the bathroom and the chatter of voices coming from the dining room as he made his way to the kitchen. His previous groan of pain was replaced by one of pleasure when he inhaled the sweet aroma of coffee.

“Bless whoever made this.” He murmured as he poured himself a cup.

“Gemma must have done it.” An unfamiliar voice said from behind him. “It was already made when I got in.”

“When you got in…” Stiles turned to face the stranger, finding an elderly woman standing by the stove. “Who are you?”

“I-“

“What are you doing here?” He reached for his knife, only to realize he hadn’t seen it since he was in the theater. “Who are you?”

“I’m trying to tell you.” She huffed in annoyance. “My name’s Blythe. I look after Nate.”

“Since when?” To the best of Stiles knowledge, Gemma was Nate’s caregiver. “I don’t know you and I interview anyone who comes through the gate. I never interviewed you.”

“You’re Stiles, right?” He nodded in confirmation. “My son and I came in while you out on a run. He, my son Jamie, works in the clinic.”

“Dr. Bishop is your son? Your name is Blythe Bishop?” He flinched involuntarily as the name fell from his lips.

“Yes.” She wrung her hands anxiously.

“Jesus Christ.”

He snatched his mug off the counter and stalked into the dining room. He slammed the cup onto the table where Nate was sitting and set his sights on Gemma’s liquor cabinet. The rum was on the top shelf, he poured a generous amount into his coffee and took a long swig from the bottle before returning it to its place on the shelf.
“It’s a bit early for that, Henry.” Nate admonished, eyeing the mug with disdain.

“Oh, Grandpa, not today.” Stiles sighed, scrubbing a hand down his face. “I’m not Henry, Nate, I’m Stiles. I know you can’t help it but…”

“Here’s your breakfast, Nate.” Blythe set a plate of scrambled eggs in front of the older man. “Are you hungry, Stiles? I can make you something.”

“I’m fine. Thanks.” He declined politely, because his father raised him to respect his elders, even if they didn’t deserve it.

“Oh, Blythe,” Nate took the woman’s hand in his and grinned up at her. “Rose is going to be so happy when she see’s that you came back to Henry.”

“Gross.” Stiles cringed into his coffee.

“Nate, no, that’s not…” The older woman became flustered as Nate spoke.

“She’s going to be so excited to see the both of you,” Nate gushed. “Let me get her. Rose! Rosie!”

“She’s not here right now, Daddy.” Gemma informed him as she walked into the room, freshly showered. “I’m sure she’ll be back later.”

“God, I hope not.” Stiles muttered under his breath. “That old bat hated me.”

“She hated everyone.” Gemma reminded him. “We talked about that. You know why she was the way she was.”

“Yeah, I know.” The reasoning behind his grandmother’s behavior had been a big part of their conversation the night before. “About that, last night, I mean, um…”

“What about it? I bitched about my mother, you were a sounding board. No big deal.” Gemma shrugged her shoulders. “Right?”

She was giving him an out, he realized. She was allowing them both to pretend he did not go looking to her for comfort only a mother could provide. Acting as if it never happened helped them avoid any awkwardness, so they could return to their usual relationship that was based on open hostility and grudging respect.

“Yeah. Right.” He smiled softly, grateful for the reprieve.

“So,” Gemma’s eyes flickered between he and Blythe. “I see you two have met.”

“Briefly.” Stiles sent Blythe a sideways glance before leveling Gemma with a glare. “Are we all gonna play dumb or are we going to lay our cards on the table?”

“I think asking that question, answers it.” Gemma theorized. “I guess that means you know who she is.”

“I’ve done my family tree.” His father had helped him as part of a school project, and they hadn’t left anyone out simply because they were not around. “Does she know who I am?”

“I know you’re my grandson.” Blythe answered before Gemma had a chance.

“No, I’m not.” Stiles shot that idea down. “‘Grandson’ implies a familial relationship, which we do not have. We have a biological link, nothing more.”
“If we could talk, if you would give me a chance to explain,” She reached out for him cautiously, but he reeled back, shying away from her touch.

“No!” He snapped, hoping she would drop it.

“But I need…” He tuned out her needs, not wanting to listen to any excuses she had.

He averted his gaze to the kitchen window instead, which offered a clear view of the driveway with the curtains pulled back. He caught a glimpse of movement. It was a blink-and–you’ll-miss-it kind of thing, but it was definitely someone sneaking around, Stiles was sure of it. He barely had time to notice the muzzle flash before it was too late.

“Get down!” He yelled, pushing the woman closest to him to the floor, while Gemma made a grab for Nate.

The old man was shell-shocked as a hail of bullets flew through the house, shattering windows and kitchen appliances. Stiles watched Gemma pull Nate from his chair and onto the ground with her. Her focus on her father was so great, that she only grunted to acknowledge the pain of a bullet slicing through her bicep.

“Gem?” Stiles twitched with the need to abandon his cover over Blythe to check on the other woman.

“I’m fine. It only grazed me.” She grabbed a cloth napkin off the table and tied a tourniquet around the wound. “What the hell is going on?”

“Red Alert! Breach at the gate!” A winded voice sounded over the radio. “B-Breach at the gate! Humans and walkers!”

“It’s a little late for that warning,” Stiles grumbled. “Gem, I need a gun.”

“Can you even hold one with your hands that way?” Gemma asked even as she removed a small caliber pistol from her ankle holster.

“I’ll power through the pain.” If he could grip a knife in his fire ravaged palms after the cliff house, then he could hold a damn gun now. “Gimme.”

“Take it. I have others.” She slid the pistol across the floor to him. “What are you going to do?”

“Deal with this guy first.” He could only do one thing at a time. “Where are your other guns?”

“I’ve got one in the liquor cabinet and a shot gun in the hall closet.”

“Get the one out of the cabinet.” It was too dangerous to try to get to the one in the hall closet. “You’ll cover me. Ms. Bishop, you keep Nate out of sight and calm.”

He flicked the safety off the gun and pulled back the hammer. He crouched low to the ground as he shuffled into the kitchen, using the cabinets as a shield. He made his way to the door, glancing over his shoulder to see if Gemma was ready. He only acted when he was confident she had his back.

He lifted a hand to the doorknob, prepared to throw open the door and shoot the perpetrator. A shot rang out above his head, breaking the glass window panel on the door. There was an audible ‘umph’ of a body hitting the pavement of the driveway, and Stiles eyes darted toward the origin of the gunfire.
“I had the shot. If I hadn’t taken it, he would have come through that door before you could open it.” Gemma reasoned, lowering her weapon. “What are you going to do now?”

“I’m gonna go out there and help.” He couldn’t hide away in the house, he had to do something. “I need to make sure the kids at the school house are secure, then I need to make contact with the club and come up with a plan of attack.”

“You’re injured.” Blythe pointed out unhelpfully. “You shouldn’t be out there.”

“I’ve had worse injuries in worse conditions.” Stiles countered. “Why am I explaining myself to you?”

“I need to get to the boys.” Yeah, he should’ve seen Gemma’s argument coming.

“You’re going to trust her to keep Nate safe?” He sent an unimpressed scowl in his ‘grandmothers’ direction. “No. You three stay here. Barricade yourselves in the bedroom closet or the bathroom. I will make sure the kids are safe.”

“Fine.” Gemma sighed. “You going out in sweats with bare feet or do you think it’d be a good idea if you put on some real clothes first?”

“That would probably be best, yeah.”

After the distress call went out, Jax and the rest of the SAMCRO members left the clubhouse in droves, armed for war. He sent Bobby, Tig, and Piney out on their bikes to ensure that Charming’s citizens stayed indoors. He, Chibs, and Opie rode out to the north wall, where the distress call originated.

He sounds of a scuffle, of gunfire, greeted them as they pulled up to the gate. They hopped out of the pick-up and ran toward the noise, finding the Argents backed against the chainlink, surrounded by walkers.

“Shit.” Jax removed his knife from his belt. “We need to contain this. Chibs, close the gate. Opie and I will help Chris and Allison.”

“Aye.”

There were eight walkers in all. It should have been easy for the Argents to put them down. Jax was surprised to see them struggling until he noticed Allison’s bow on the ground and blood pouring from a small wound on Chris’s leg.

Jax and Opie assisted them the best they could, using their knives to take down the biters accosting the pair. The shoved the blades into the backs of the dead skulls, one-by-one, until they were nothing but bodies at their feet.

“Are you guys okay?” Jax questioned, retrieving Allison’s bow and returning it to her.

“Were you bit?” Opie gestured to the injury on the elder Argent’s thigh.

“Shot.” Chris reached down a hand to put pressure on the wound.

“What the hell happened out here?”
“We were working with the CC team, burning the walkers we took out this morning. Kozik was thrown off the wall.” Allison said as she tried to catch her breath. “We tried to check on him, but a group attacked us from behind.”

“We heard a call over the walkie-talkie before it was smashed.” Chris nodded to the crumpled device lying on the ground. “We don’t know who made it, but it had to be someone close.”

“It was Harley.” Jax had recognized her voice over the radio. “Where is she? She works the wall with Kozik in the morning.”

“I’ve got a blood trail.” Opie’s gaze locked on the red stains in the dirt.

“I can see Kozik.” Chibs stated, glancing through the holes in the chainlink. “He’s dead. Biters are feeding on him.”

“Can you get to him?” They didn’t leave their own to be taken apart by the dead. “Can you get to him safely?”

“No.” Chibs admitted sadly. “No. There’s too many of them for me to get him on my own.”

“I can help.” Allison volunteered, loading her bow.

“Thank you.” Jax appreciated the young woman’s help more than she knew. “Opie, you and I will follow the blood splatter. Chris, stay where you are, keep the weight off your leg, and keep a look out.”

“Okay.”

Jax and Opie allowed the trail of blood to lead them to the supply shed. There was a bloody handprint on the plywood door and the padlock usually attached to the latch was lying discarded on the ground, the key still lodged in it. Jax took the door, yanking it open while Opie aimed his gun into it.

“Don’t shoot!” Harley’s panic-stricken voice cried out.

“It’s okay.” Opie holstered his weapon and reached in to help the woman out of the shed. “Are you okay?”

“No.” She admitted, cradling her arm to her chest. “I need to get to the clinic.”

“Let me see.” Jax took her hand in his as gently as he could, spotting the teeth marks on her left forearm. “You were bit.”

“I was doing my walk-around. I saw Kozik go down and the CC team get attacked. I tried to help, but as soon as I started shooting, they shot back. I had to climb down before I fell.” She explained, wincing as pain radiated through her injured appendage. “The guy who killed Kozik, he opened the gate, let the walkers in. There were too many of them. I couldn’t…. One got the upper hand on me. I didn’t even see the bite until I got to the shed.”

“We’ll get you to the clinic, okay? We’ve got the truck. We’ll drive as fast as we can.” Jax placed a hand on the small of her back to guide her toward the vehicle. “That’s what you want, right? You want Tara to amputate?”

“I want to live.” Amputation wasn’t ideal, no one really wanted it, but it gave them a chance they wouldn’t have otherwise. “But, Jax, the guy, the one who killed Kozik, he’s the guy who came in
while you were gone.”

“The guy who said he knew Stiles and Scott?”

“Theo. Yeah.” She nodded. “I saw him let in at least twenty other people and whatever walkers got through. There might’ve been more, but that’s all I saw before I hid. I’m sorry.”

“You’ve got nothing to be sorry for.” Hiding in that shed saved her life and that was nothing she needed to apologize for. “You did a great job.”

The path to the school was a bloody one. Stiles had come across a dozen walkers, two men armed with assault rifles and machetes, and nine Charming residents dead in the street. He relied on the knife he had taken from Gemma’s house to issue a silent sneak attack on the biters and the men with the guns before continuing on to his destination.

He did a perimeter sweep of the old elementary school first, which now held classes for children of all ages. The front was clear, but the back told a different story. There were bodies of walkers scattered all over the grass, their heads sliced clean off.

“Stiles?” The hushed whisper of his name had him whipping around to face the person who had said it.

“Lydia,” He sighed in relief at the sight of a friendly face, who had Kira and Malia at her side. Relief quickly morphed into irritation when he realized they were out in the open instead of safely in their homes. “What the hell are you guys doing out here? We’re under attack.”

“My dad works here.” Kira nodded to the school.

“So does my mom. We had to see if they were okay.” Lydia put her hands on her hips, fully expecting an argument.

“I’m just back up.” Malia waved her hand awkwardly.

“What are you doing out here? You’re hurt.” Lydia poked his stomach with a finger, causing him to hiss at the painful sensation. “You are the one who shouldn’t be out here. You’re a liability, at more risk of hurting yourself further than of helping anyone else.”

“I can take care of myself.” He was more than capable of handling himself, injured or not. “My nephews should be here, if they’re not, I’ll be going to my brother’s house next.”

“Why didn’t you just radio your brother to ask where his kids were?” The look Lydia leveled him with suggested he was an idiot for not doing that to begin with.

“We don’t know if the radios have been compromised.” One of the people who had breached the gate could have grabbed a walkie-talkie off the body of someone they killed. “We can’t risk calling out on one and putting others in danger.”

“Okay. That’s true.” The banshee ceded to his point. “Well, we’re all here, so we should check out the school together. Malia can you hear anything in there?”

“Lots of heartbeats. They’re scared, but I don’t smell or hear anyone angry or out to kill.” The coyote described what her enhanced abilities helped her sense.
“That distress call went out over the emergency channel, the school staff would’ve heard it.” Of course the teachers and students were frightened, the town was under attack and they were vulnerable. “We’ll go in pairs. Lydia and Kira, take this back entrance. Malia and I will take the front. Good?”

“Good. Let’s go.”

The front entrance to the school had been cleared twice, it seemed, once by Stiles and then again by the women. There was a solitary biter milling about, whom Malia put down by extending her claws and sunk them into the walkers skull. Stiles blanched as he opened the school doors, an easy feat seeing as they were unlocked.

“Not a good sign.” As soon as the distress signal went out, those doors should have been secured.

“Maybe they just forgot to lock them in the panic of things.” Malia speculated as they walked into the building.

“Not likely.” There were protocols the school staff followed in the event of a breach. “We need to be prepared to find bad guys in here.”

“I thought we were already prepared.” She showed off her claws once more.

“Let me rephrase,” He didn’t want there to be any confusion here. “We need to be prepared to kill the enemy if they don’t surrender. Can you do that or not? It’s okay if it goes against your moral code, like Scott’s, but I need to know before we go any further.”

“I’m not against killing the people or things trying to kill me.” Malia stated calmly. “We do what we have to do to survive or protect the people we care about.”

“Yes we do.” He was glad someone in the pack understood that.

“So, where are we going from here?”

“Straight down the hall.” He motioned to the long corridor. “They would have moved the kids into the library.”

“Why not the gym?”

“They can hand behind the stacks in the library.” The gym was too exposed, just one large room with no place to hide. “We check each classroom as we go. We should meet up with Lydia and Kira in the middle.”

Stiles took the left side of the hall, while Malia took the right. There were twenty classrooms in the school all together, ten for he and Malia to go through and ten for Lydia and Kira. They were all empty, a sure sign that the school had yet to be breached.

“Did you guys find anything?” He asked as he and Malia met the other pair in the designated spot.

“No.” Kira shook her head. “It’s clear.”

“Our side too.” That left the library, which marked the halfway point in the hall. “I don’t have my keys, so I’ll have to use the special knock.”

“Why can’t we just walk in?” Lydia inquired impatiently.

“You could, but you’d get shot.” Aside from the children, everyone at the school was armed. “I
“Secret knock it is.” Kira chuckled nervously. “My dad didn’t mention learning a special knock.”

“Mary knows it.” She ran the school and spent most of her time there, she was the only one who really needed to know the knock. “Or, I hope she does. It’s been a while since we came up with it. We’ve never had to use it.”

The special knock was a combination of short and long raps against the door that amounted to ‘safe’ in Morse code. It wasn’t the most complex system, but it was simple enough to teach the school staff. It served to let the people inside the library know it was an ally outside the door.

The door opened a crack after Stiles beat his knuckles against the wooden frame. The barrel of a pistol was visible first, along with the wrinkled hand brandishing it.

“I know Mary cannot possibly be the one at the door, because she knows better than to hold her weapon in a position where someone could easily disarm her.” Stiles let his disapproval of her action leak into his tone.

The gun was jerked out of sight instantly as the door swung open, revealing the Winston matriarch.

“Do not get smart with me, Nathaniel Thomas.” The old woman narrowed her eyes at him. “Today is not the day for it.”

“You first name is Nathaniel?” Lydia quirked a curious brow. “That’s so ordinary. I always thought it’d be something strange.”

“My name is Stiles.” Most people found his nickname strange enough. “Mary, what’s the situation here?”

“We’re fine. We haven’t had any problems.” Mary pushed the door open further to allow them access to the large library. “Kira, you’re father is in the children’s section, reading to the little kids. Lydia, your mother’s with the older kids, by the young adult novels. We’re just trying to keep everyone calm.”

“Abel and Thomas are with Mr. Yukimura?” Stiles tried to look around the older woman, to catch the smallest glimpse of his nephews.

“No.”

“No?”

“Tara radioed me this morning, said Thomas was running a fever, and she was going to take he and Abel with her to the clinic.” Mary divulged, placing a comforting hand on Stiles shoulder to soothe his fear. “I assume that’s where they are.”

“Then I gotta go.” He had to make sure the boys were safe. “Malia, Kira, and Lydia will stay here with you, to help keep the other kids safe. Is that okay, girls? Can you do that?”

“Yeah. We’ve got it. Go.”

The moment the distress call was sent out, Juice somehow found himself in the possession of three children. The two Teller boys and the still unnamed baby were left in his charge. Tara had moved
the four of them into the exam room furthest from the clinic entrance for safety, then went to stand guard at the receptions desk herself.

“Uncle Juice,” Abel fidgeted anxiously as he sat at the end of Juice’s hospital bed. “Something bad is happening, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” Lying to the older boy wouldn’t do any good. “But it’s going to be okay.”

“How do you know?”

“Our family will make sure of it.” He knew they were all out there right now, trying to protect their town and the people in it. “Nothing is going to happen to you boys, okay?”

“Okay.” That was probably the least believable ‘okay’ Juice had ever heard.

“Hey, take this,” Juice held a blue marker out to Abel. “The cast on my ankle and foot looks kind of plain and boring. Why don’t you draw something on it? It’ll keep you busy.”

“Sure!” The kid perked up, snatching the marker from him.

“Uncle,” Thomas patted Juice’s leg. “Is this your and Uncle Stiles baby?”

“Uh,” He glanced down at the infant resting peacefully in the crook of his arm. “If your mother has her way, he will be.”

“What’s his name?”

“Good question.” He and Stiles hadn’t had the time to discuss that yet. “What do you think it should be?”

“Hmm.” Thomas put a finger to his lips, looking deep in thought. “I think Batman is a good name.”

“Keep thinking.” He instructed the boy. “How about a name that’s not a superhero?”

“Okay.”

The boys relaxed as they busied themselves with their tasks. They talked amongst each other, keeping their voices low. The quiet of the room allowed Juice to listen to the not-so distant sounds of gunfire and screams outside of the clinic.

He held the baby a little tighter, as if the people who had breached the gate might steal him away. He felt helpless being designated as the babysitter, even with weaponry nearby. If someone did break in, there was not a lot he could do to protect the boys when his injuries hindered his movement.

Any hope he had of things at the clinic going smoothly were dashed when the bang of a door slamming open echoed through the building, quickly followed by shouting. Abel and Thomas went stock-still with fear and the baby woke with a shrill shriek. Juice reached blindly for the gun on the bedside table, but the child in his arms kept him from grasping it.

“Damn it.” He growled and shifted the infant in his arms. “Abel, get off the bed. You too, Thomas. Both of you. Come on.”

“Why?” Thomas asked as his big brother helped him off the gurney.

“Take the baby.” Juice leaned over the side of the bed to hand the infant off to the older Teller boy.
“Go in the bathroom and lock the door.”

“Why?” Thomas asked again.

“‘Cause bad people might come in here and it’s safer in the bathroom.” Abel explained, nudging his little brother to the bathroom.

Juice stumbled out of bed only after the kids were safely locked away in the lavatory. He bit back a yelp when his broken foot made contact with the linoleum floor. He leaned against the bed as he made a grab for the IV stand, using it as a makeshift walking stick. Confident that he was steady, he picked up the gun with his free hand and hobbled over to the door.

Each step he took sent shockwaves of pain through his body, but he forced himself to keep going until he reached the exam room door. He put his back against the wall, allowing it to take his weight, as he twisted the knob, drawing his gun up to the opening as he peaked out.

He had a clear view down the hall, a clear view of the carnage. Tara was in the middle of the corridor, gun drawn, arms covered in blood, and a group of walkers in front of her. She had a good handle on them, was a crack shot with her handgun, it was headshots all around, but from the ammo she was blowing through, he could tell she would need to reload soon.

“Tara!” He called out to her as he pushed the door open and cocked his pistol. “Back up.”

The woman emptied what was left of her clip while she did as she was told. Juice picked up the slack, firing at the walkers, when she was forced to reload.

“Where are the kids?” She questioned as she slid a new clip into place.

“Bathroom.” He jerked his head toward the room. “Where are Nurse McCall and Dr. Bishop?”

“They haven’t shown up yet this morning.” That made sense, given how early it was. “Hopefully they’re somewhere safe.”

“How did these guys get in?” He gestured toward the dwindling number of walkers tottering down the hall.

“Broke down the front door.” She grumbled, aiming her gun once more.

“Drop!” A masculine voice yelled from behind the biters.

Tara’s reaction time was better than his. She grabbed him by the shirt collar and pulled him down to the floor. They barely had their stomachs on the carpet when gunfire erupted through the hallway. The quick succession of shots was enough to tell Juice it was an AK being fired, probably with a Son behind the trigger.

“Uncle Juice! Help!”

Juice and Tara both scrambled to their feet and darted into the exam room bathroom as quickly as they could. The boys were huddled into the corner of the room, keeping themselves out of reach of the hand coming through the busted window.

“Cover the kids.” Juice ordered. “I’ll get him.”

He used the wall as support as he limped over to the window. He grabbed what he thought was a walkers wrist and pinned it to the windowsill as he used the butt of his gun to break the remaining
pieces of glass. With an unrestricted view of the face, he saw that it wasn’t a walker at all.

“Let me in!” The man snarled, raising his other hand, a machete in its grip.

“Son of a bitch.” Juice staggered back as the machete sliced into the windowsill, missing him by an inch.

He brought his gun up, prepared to fire the single bullet left in the chamber into the man’s head. His plan was cut short, however, when the man jerked suddenly and slumped over the sill, blood dripping from his mouth. Standing behind the newly deceased, was a wide-eyed Nurse McCall with a bloody knife in her hands.

“W-Where the hell did you come from?” He spluttered in surprise.

“The front was blocked.” Melissa said as she wiped her knife off on her jeans. “Jax told me to try and bring her around back.”

“Bring who?” He didn’t see anyone with her.

“Me.” Harley poked her head around the window. “I need Dr. Knowles.”

“Juice, take the kids.” Tara instructed as she went to the window. “Take them back to the exam room. I’ll help Melissa with her.”

Juice did as he was told, taking Thomas’s hand and helping Abel off the floor. He urged the kids into the other room, noting the absence of gunfire and moaning of walkers. He placed himself between the children and the available exits just as Jax, Chibs, and Opie burst through the doorway leading from the hall.

“Christ, Juicy, sit down before you fall down.” Chibs admonished, wrapping an arm around Juice to help him back into bed. “All right?”

“I don’t know, is it?” Were they still in danger or had the threat been neutralized?

“Jax, help me get her on the gurney!” Tara yelled for her husband as she and Melissa brought Harley in through the window.

Jax and Opie rushed to the woman’s side, taking Harley’s weight. They lifted her up and onto the hospital bed Stiles had previously occupied. It was only when they stepped away to give the doctor and nurse room to work that Juice noticed the gnarly bite on her arm.

“Chibs, I’m gonna need you.” Tara waved the Scot over.

“Aye.”

“Tara, you got this?” Jax asked his wife. “Opie and I gotta go back out, try to get a handle on all of this.”

“Take Juice and the kids into the other exam room first.” The doctor nodded to the boys. “Abel and Thomas don’t need to see this, and Juice can protect them if something else happens.”

“I’ll need more ammo. I’ve only got one in the chamber.” Juice held up his pistol.

“Take this.” Chibs passed his rifle over to him. “I won’t need it in here.”

“Come on. Juice, kids, let’s go.” Jax hefted his youngest on to his hip.
“Be careful, please.” The worry in Tara’s tone overpowered the authority of her order.

“We will.”

Distance wise, the path from the school to the clinic was a short one. It was a couple of blocks at the most, but with walkers and enemy forces blocking the way, it seemed a hell of a lot longer. No matter which street Stiles turned down, there was something or someone impeding his journey.

He kept between the houses; they provided the optimal amount of cover he needed to do what he had to do. He left his gun holstered, used his knife like he had on the road. He was slow, quiet, and precise in his movements, in his kills.

He peered out to the road, eyeing a target carrying a shotgun and walking up the front porch of a duplex. Stiles crouched low and kept his footsteps as light as possible as he rounded the corner. He followed as closely behind as he could without alerting the man to his presence. He stalled on the porch steps, waiting for the stranger to open the door so the squeak of the hinges masked the creak of the old wooden steps.

The second the man was over the threshold Stiles was on him. He tackled him to the ground, earning an elbow to the right side of his ribs. He shoved his knee into the man’s back, his forearm against his neck, and his knife into the base of his skull. He held him there until his body ceased all movements.

“Stiles.” His lifted his gaze to see a man coming out from behind the couch, alarm written all over his face.

“Hey Lowell.” He greeted the long-time TM mechanic with a small smile. “How’s it going?”

“Uh,” Lowell’s eyes flickered to the dead man in his entryway. “Not too good.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” He yanked his knife free and pulled himself up off the floor. “I’m gonna come back later and, um, clean this up. I wouldn’t just leave a dead guy on your floor.”

“D-Don’t worry a-about it.” Lowell stuttered. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Okay. Wait for everything to settle down before you do.” It was too dangerous to do it right now.

“I will.”

“Um, here,” Stiles picked up the shotgun and held it out to him. “You take that.”

“You don’t need it?”

“Nope. I’ve got a knife.” It was not the knife he was used to taking into battle, it was bigger, sat oddly in his hands, but it would do the job. “And I’ve got a handgun. That’s all I need.”

“If you’re sure…” Lowell took the gun for himself.

“I’ve got to go. You stay here, stay safe.”

Stiles exited through the back door of the house, instead of the front. He hopped the small fence and returned to his ‘between the houses’ post. There were two walkers between Lowell’s home and the one next to it. Stiles put down the first one easily enough, but the second one wasn’t as simple.
He was pulling his blade free of the first walker’s skull when a load ‘boom’ reverberated throughout the town, making the ground vibrate beneath his feet. The shock startled him back, causing him to lose his footing and fall to the grass. The remaining walker fell with him, landing on top of him.

He cried out, the weight of the biter on his wounds causing an agonizing pain. Jaws snapped near his neck as he tried uselessly to buck it off him. His fingers gripped at thin air, his knife having been tossed from his grip before he hit the ground.

“Oh shit.”

He could feel the gun holstered in the waistband of his jeans pressing into the small of his back. He just needed to lift his body enough to reach under himself and grab it, and then he would be fine.

“Benefits of a thigh holster.” He muttered to himself as he failed to retrieve the pistol.

A kind of fear he hadn’t felt in a long time set in as he pushed at the walker, trying to keep it from sinking its teeth into his neck. He turned his head to the side, hoping to find something he could use as a weapon. It was just his luck that there were no sticks or rocks big enough to do any damage. The only thing he found were several sets of feet tripping over themselves as they ambled over.

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.”

He smacked his palms against the biter’s chest and shoved his knee into its abdomen. His pain made him weak, limited what he could do. Whatever strength he still possessed was waning quickly. None of what he did made a difference, it only kept the walker at bay, while the sounds of the struggle drew more of them in.

“Damn it!” Someone shouted loudly from down that street.

Stiles froze as he recognized it as his brother’s voice. The sudden exclamation caught the walkers attention to, it’s head jerked to the direction of the noise. Stiles used the distraction to his advantage.

“Jax!” He screamed hoarsely, earning a wet growl from the walker on top of him. “Jax!”

“Duck!” A male voice, that definitely did not belong to one of his brothers, ordered from somewhere behind him.

He did as instructed, smacking his head down against the ground. A booted foot came out of nowhere, nailing the biter in the head. Stiles did the rest of the work, shoving the walker off him.

“Come on.” Strong arms grasped at his shoulders. “Get up. Up.”

He crab-walked back until he hit his savior’s legs. The man grabbed him under his pits and pulled him up to his feet. Stiles barely had a chance to see that it was Jamie Bishop, because of course it was, before he was pushed behind him, the older man taking a protective stance in front of him.

He glanced over Jamie’s shoulder to watch the biters that had trudged over from the street drop, one right after another. Jamie picked up Stiles knife from the ground and took out three of them himself. Stiles reached once more for the gun in his jeans, but it proved unnecessary when the last walker fell, revealing his brothers behind it.
“Jax!” Stiles darted around Jamie, rushing into his brother’s waiting arms.

“Hey, it’s okay.” Jax cupped his face between his hands. “Are you okay?”

“Y-Yeah. Yes.” He batted his brother’s hands away and buried his head in the crook of the older man’s neck.

“You’re okay, buddy. I’m here. I’ve got ya.” Jax wrapped his arms around him. “Dr. Bishop, thank you, for helping him out.”

“No problem.” The doctor brushed off the gratitude. “I was in the neighborhood.”


“I live here.” Jamie knocked a fist against the house that sat beside Lowell’s. “It’s the house my mother and I were assigned.”

“Oh.”

“They could use you at the clinic.” Jax informed the doctor.

“Clinic…” Stiles reared back, fear spiking. “Juice o-or Thomas? Mary said Tara took the boys to the clinic with her, ‘cause Thomas had a fever.”

“They’re both fine. I promise.” Jax assured him. “It’s Harley. She was bit.”

“Oh god.” Stiles heart sunk, but he took a small amount of comfort in knowing she was at the clinic receiving medical care, which meant she had a chance at living. “Is anyone else hurt?”

“Probably gonna have a load of people from the farm heading there after that explosion.” Jamie observed the cloud of smoke hanging over the crops. “I’ll get my kit and head over.”

“Explosion…” Stiles could deduce what that ‘boom’ was now. “That farm is too god damn easy of a target.”

“It’s a good thing all that food Nero’s crew gave us is in town and not out there.” Opie remarked with the upside of things. “Dr. Bishop, since you’re going to the clinic, you’re taking Stiles with you.”


“You’re bleeding.” Jax pulled up his shit, seeing the blood seeping sluggishly from his stomach wounds.

“You tore your stitches.” Jamie leaned in to examine the injuries. “Both your surgical incision and the initial wound have been reopened.”

“You said yourself the clinic will be slammed.” They didn’t need one more patient clogging up the waiting area. “I’ll be fine for a while. Or, we can find a needle and thread, and I’ll sow it up myself.”

“You are going to the clinic, whether you like it or not.” Jax snapped, effectively putting an end to the conversation. “We’ll get you both their safely.”

“I can take care of myself.” Stiles scoffed at the insinuation that he couldn’t. “And Uncle Jamie too.”
“You know who he is, I shouldn’t be surprised.” Yeah, Stiles didn’t understand why Jax or anyone else thought they could keep anything from him, he always found out. “That doesn’t matter right now. Stiles, I know you can take care of yourself, but I don’t trust you to actually go to the clinic. We will take you.”

“Fine.”

Any thoughts Jax had about getting Stiles and Jamie to the clinic in a timely manner were thrown out when they saw the state of Main Street. The walkers had been led to the residential areas, but their human foes were lining the roads that led from the gate, through town square, all the way to the farm.

They stuck to the side streets as they made their way through town, meeting up with Bobby and Tig three blocks from the diner. The pair looked like hell, run down and haggard.

“Where are your bikes?” Jax asked as they all converged together in an alleyway.

“We had to ditch them.” Bobby mumbled. “They were drawing too much attention.”

“Where’s my dad?” Opie asked after his father, who Jax had sent out with Bobby and Tig.

“The guard post by St. Thomas.” Bobby nodded toward the tall tower that offered a full view of the town. “He’s got a sniper rifle and plenty of rounds.”

“What is he doing?” Jamie furrowed his brows as he stared at Stiles.

The kid had his back against the wall of the old library, a knife gripped firmly in his hand, his head peering around to view the street. There was a calculating expression on his face, a calm stillness to his movements. To the naked eye, it looked as if he were keeping watch, but Jax knew better.

“He’s hunting.”

Stiles bided his time, waited for the target to get close before he struck. He lunged forward, attacked a man from behind. He clapped one hand over his mouth, muffling his shouts of protest, and used his other hand to stab the guy in the arm that held a rifle. The weapon clattered to the ground as Stiles yanked the man back into the alleyway with them.

“I’m going to remove my hand and you are going to tell us why you’re here.” Stiles shoved the guy, a teenager really, against the brick wall as he spoke. “If you scream, yell out for your buddies, the blade that I’ve got in your arm is going to be in your skull before they can come riding to the rescue. Understood?”

Stiles didn’t slide his hand away from the kids mouth until Jax and Opie had created semi-circle around him, boxing him in so he couldn’t escape.

“Why are you here?” Jax asked the question himself, taking control of the situation. “We know one of your guys infiltrated our walls, showed up claiming to know my brother. He took advantage of our hospitality. You are going to tell me why.”

“Walls. Supplies. Food.” The kid listed the reasons off. “You got a nice set up here. We want it.”

“You could have just come in. We don’t turn people away at first glance.” That was a policy Jax
intended to change once things settled down. “You could have joined our community. There didn’t have to be any bloodshed.”

“We don’t share.” He shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly. “The supplies you’ve got will last your whole town a couple of weeks, a few months at the most. My group, as small as it is, it would last us well over a year, maybe two or three.”

“Your group… I know Theo is your inside man. Harley told me he’s the one who took out my man Kozik. Who are you?” Jax reached into the kids pocket to retrieve his wallet, flipping it open to read the drivers license. “Donovan Donati. Beacon Hills, CA. Someone you know, Stiles?”

“Never heard of him.” Stiles released his hold on the kid and stepped back, allowing Tig to take his place.

“Oh really? ‘Cause I know you. You’re Sheriff Stilinski’s kid.” Donovan spit out the name as if it were something dirty. “You’re hiding away here in this town like a coward, it’s not really a surprise, considering who your old man was.”

“Watch where you’re going with this, man.” Opie warned, tightening his grip on the teenager.

“Stilinski was bitc-“ The derogatory term on the tip of Donovan’s tongue was interrupted by the knife lodged unceremoniously into his skull.

“He already told us what we wanted to know.” Tig muttered, pulling his blade free while they let the body slip from their grips. “No reason to let him talk shit. It’s not like we were going to let him live anyway.”

“Jax, you said someone named Theo came through the gates claiming to know me.” Stiles was completely non-pulsed by the kill, not even sparing a glance toward the body.

“He came in while we were in Sacramento picking up you and Juice.” Opie explained. “He used your and Scott’s names to get in. You know anyone named Theo?”

“Yeah. He’s the one who did this.” Stiles wiggled his bandaged fingers. “He left after they brought Nero in. He didn’t come back. I guess now I know where he went.”

“How did he know where to go? Juice said he didn’t say anything.” Tig’s underhanded implication that Stiles had ratted out Charming made Jax want to punch the older man.

“I didn’t say anything.” Stiles looked more than a little offended that anyone in the club would think he did.

“Juice’s reaper tat.” Jax blurted out, his mind putting together pieces of the puzzle. “They knew what it meant, that’s why they burned it off. They knew he was SAMCRO. They knew we were the closest charter to Sacramento. They took a chance on us still being here.”

“We know the how and the why they are here, now we just have to get them the fuck back out.” Stiles leaned down to pull his knife from Donovan’s arm. “And Theo-“

“Is mine.” Jax said in a tone that did not leave room for any arguments. “You are going to the clinic with Jamie. We had this discussion already.”

“Yeah. Yeah. Let’s do this.”

“There are thirteen of Theo and Donovan’s people between us and the clinic, and those are only
the ones I can see.” Opie relayed a quick headcount of the men and women in the road. “Harley said at least twenty of them came in, plus Theo.”

“One down.” Tig kicked Donovan’s body.

“Gemma put down one at her house. I got two in the street on the way to the school and one breaking into Lowell’s house.” That was three for Stiles, one for Gem, adding in Donovan, that made four. “If we put down these guys, that’ll put a good dent in their puny excuse for an army.”

“If we do this, we gotta be safe about it.” Jax sheathed his knife and removed his gun from its holster. “Knives are quiet but guns are quick.”

“Gunfire is going to draw in the walkers.” Stiles reminded him. “We’ll have to do this fast or we’ll be boxed in by the dead and the living.”

“Stiles, you’re staying right here. Use the library wall as cover.” No way in hell was Jax going to send his baby brother into the middle of a firefight. “Jamie, we’ll get you across the street, you can use the old post office for cover. Opie, you and Tig take this end. Bobby and I will go down the block and around to hit ‘em from the back.”

“Let’s do it.”

Attacking the enemy from all sides was the safe play, but it required patience. Stiles was never big on patience, but he was learning. He knew going off half-cocked would get people, his family, killed.

He waited for Jax and Bobby to get into position. He kept his eyes locked on Opie and his grip on Jamie’s bicep. He didn’t move an inch until he got the signal.

It was a click over the radio and a subtle nod from Tig that set it all in motion. He let go of Jamie who bolted across the street, Opie and Tig laying down cover fire for him. Stiles clicked the safety off his gun and fired into the crowd of enemies.

The process was simple, at first. Aim for the head shot and hope you didn’t miss. Then the walkers set in, and five unaccounted for men, appearing behind Jax and Bobby, who had yet to notice them.

“Opie!” Stiles yelled to his other brother. “I’m going around!”

He jogged to the end of the alleyway, not giving Opie a chance to protest. He took the time to pull a dumpster to the middle, blocking the entrance to the alley. He wouldn’t risk leaving Opie and Tig exposed to walkers coming from the side.

He had to run two blocks to get to Jax and he only made it down one before a pack of walkers came at him from a side street. He held is ground, fired the two bullets he had left in his gun and dropped the weapon, not having a second to spare to holster it. He kicked one biter back and shoved his knife in to one next to him.

A rush of footsteps behind him and a pained grunt sounding from the direction his brother was in caught him off guard. That distraction, the icy fear flowing through his veins, had him freezing up. It allowed the biters in front of him to get in close, to tumble into him with their jaws snapping.
“I don’t have time for this!” He yelled, smacking his elbow into the walkers jowls in an effort to get it away from him.

“Watch it!” That was all the warning he got before an arrow sliced through the walkers skull, the pointy end coming out precariously close to Stiles face.

“Holy shit.” He reached around to pull the arrow out. He used the dead biter as a shield while he stabbed another with the arrow.

A large hand grabbed a fistful of his shirt, tugging him away from the danger. He turned around, fully expecting to find a Son, but instead finding himself sandwiched between both Argents.

“I need to get to my brother.” Stiles told them, not bothering to ask where the hell they had even come from. “You two got this?”

“We got it.” Chris accentuated their handle on the situation with a crossbow bolt to the head of a walker. “Go ahead.”

“I need a gun. My knife is too slow.” The blade was good when it came to taking on biters, but humans armed with automatic weapons and machetes required something a bit faster on the draw. “Do you have one I can borrow?”

“Take this.” Allison handed off her pistol crossbow. “You remember how to use it?”

“I remember.” It had been part of the packs weapons training before they left Beacon Hills. “You don’t need it?”

“I’ve still got by compound bow.” She pulled the strap that held the bigger bow on her back. “Go help your brother.”

“Thank you.”

While the walkers attention was deviated by the noises the Argents made, Stiles dashed around them. He cleared the last block quickly, skidding as he rounded the corner and darted down the alleyway, straight to his brother.

Jax was slumped against the wall, trying to reload his gun with shaking hands. He was facing the street, his back to Stiles, who could identify three distinct wounds there with blood pouring from them. He watched his brother sway on his feet before sliding down the wall to the pavement.

“Jackson.” He was at his brother’s side in a second, crouching down next to him.

“God damn it, Stiles.” Jax huffed, sweat dripping down his face. “You’re supposed to be up the block with Opie.”

“I need to check you for exit wounds.” Stiles dropped the bow and attempted to lift Jax’s shirt to inspect his torso, only for the older man to deny him. “Jax.”

“I wasn’t shot.” Jax shook his head. “Stabbed by some asshole behind me.”

“I saw them come up behind you. I came to help.” Evidently, he was too late. “I’m sorry I wasn’t here sooner.”

“Help Bobby and the others.” Jax nudged the pistol bow back into his hands. “I’ll cover you.”

“Do you know how many are left?”
“Three, I think.” Jax did not seem too sure of himself. “One was trying to spar with Bobby when I went down.”

“I’ll get him.”

Stiles ducked his head around the side of the building to see into the street. To his right, Opie was firing shots at the two men left standing on his side, while Jamie and Tig were turned in the other direction, keeping the walkers from bearing down on them. Bobby was to his left, pushed against a car with hands wrapped around his neck.

His hands weren’t as steady as he would have liked, but he aimed and took the shot anyway. His crossbow bolt was off, a few inches too low, lodging into the meat of the man’s shoulder. It wasn’t much, but it gave Bobby the opening he needed to slug the man, retrieve his gun, and finish the man off. Bobby’s shot was followed by two more, from Opie, putting down the remaining two men.

“Where’s Jax?” Opie shouted from up the road.

“He’s here.” Stiles pointed to the alley. “We need to get him to the clinic. He’s bad.”

“Who the hell is this now?” Bobby grumbled as a pick-up came barreling down the road, screeching to a stop beside them.

“Hey.” Mason poked his head out of the driver side window, Liam visible in the passenger seat. “Are you guys okay?”

“What the fuck are you doing out here?” Stiles couldn’t keep the disapproval at Mason and Liam being out and about from his voice.

“Taking injured from the farm to the clinic.” Liam gestured to the bed of the truck that was filled with people. “You need a ride.”

“Yeah. Wait for us.” He waved Opie over as he ran back to Jax’s side. “We gotta get him in the truck.”

“Hurry it up.” Tig barked. “Those walkers are closing in.”

“We’re coming.”

Opie lifted Jax off the ground like he weighed nothing and carried him over to the pick-up. Stiles hopped in first, helping the bigger man maneuver Jax’s body onto the floor. He sat in the middle, situated his brother until his head was in his lap. Opie made himself fit near the tailgate, keeping one hand on Jax’s legs to keep him steady as the blond faded in and out of consciousness.

“Bobby, Tig, let’s go.” The SAMCRO VP urged them into the vehicle.

“We’re gonna stay back. Get a handle on these walkers.”

“Chris and Allison are just past the alleyway. They’ll help you out.” Stiles held the pistol bow out over the side of the truck. “Give that back to Allison for me.”

“I will.” Bobby promised, taking the bow and smacking the side of the pick-up. “Get going.”

As the truck began to pull away, Stiles swore he could have see Theo watching him from the diner patio. There was an ugly smirk on his face and a bloody knife in his hands. It was only a glimpse
before he was out of sight, but Stiles knew that it was Theo who stabbed Jax.

Despite everything going on, the kids miraculously managed to fall asleep. Abel and Thomas had curled up together in a chair, the baby in the playpen. Harley was sedated in the bed across the room, her amputated limb elevated with a pillow. Melissa was at the door, keeping watch, checking on her patients every ten to fifteen minutes.

Juice was sitting up on his own gurney, having been glared into submission by Nurse McCall the last time he tried to crawl out of it. He was agitated, antsy, hating that his friends were in danger and he couldn’t help them. He knew leaving the clinic wasn’t an option, but he had to do something.

“I can guard the front door.” He tried to plead his case to the nurse. “Make sure no biters or bad guys get in.”

“No.”

“I helped Tara with the walkers from before.” He may be hurt, but he wasn’t entirely useless.

“You’re in here to protect the children.” Melissa reminded him, glancing over at the slumbering boys. “That’s important.”

“I know.” He did not take that job lightly. “I’m just used to being out and in it.”

A door ricocheting violently against a wall somewhere else in the building tore away the illusion of calmness inside the clinic. Juice grabbed for his gun, pulling back the blankets on the bed and preparing to climb out to see what the hell was going on. Melissa held up a hand to stop him as she assessed the situation through the viewing window on the door.

“Tara!”

“That’s Stiles.” Juice was off the gurney before Melissa could object.

“Take this,” She handed him a cane that had been leaning against a chair. “The group that went into St. Thomas brought back crutches, but they’re in the storage locker. This will have to do.”

“Watch the kids.” He traded the assault rifle for the walking stick. “I’ll be back.”

He leaned heavily on the cane as he shuffled out of the room. He let the sound draw him into the main examination room. There were more people surrounding the area than Tara usually permitted, but once he caught sight of the patient, he understood why.

Jax was lying unconscious on the gurney while Tara and Dr. Bishop turned him over, inspecting the injuries on his back. Blood gushed from the wounds, flowing off the bed and onto the floor. The sight made him sick and from the looks of things, he wasn’t the only one.

Juice’s gaze immediately found Stiles, who was standing off to the side of the room, trying his best to stay out of the way. He was white as a sheet, curled in on himself as if the weight of the world was crushing him. It was the sheer terror etched in his features that Juice was not use to seeing that spurred him into action.

He hobbled over to the younger man, dropping the cane to free up his hands. He wrapped both his
arms around him, bringing him in close. His heart broke as he felt Stiles body tremble as he took in a shuddering breath.

“It’s going to be okay.” It was a pointless platitude, he knew. It did nothing to soothe Stiles, neither did the kiss he placed on the younger man’s temple.

“Chibs, I need you to get the blood from the fridge, please.” Tara’s sniffled out the request, her eyes red with unshed tears.

“I got it.” The Scot assured her.

“Hey. Sorry.” Mason apologized as he rushed into the room. “We might have another problem.”

“What is it?” Opie asked, his eyes never leaving Jax’s still form.

“The whole town is gathering in city hall.”

“What? Why the fuck would they do that?” Juice found it hard to believe any sane person would go out into that warzone willingly.

“The radio broadcast.” Mason flicked on his walkie-talkie, turning the volume up so they could all listen in.

‘ALL CHARMING RESIDENTS REPORT TO THE TOWN HALL FOR AN EMERGENCY EVACUATION MEETING. I REPEAT, ALL CHARMING RESIDENTS REPORT TO THE TOWN HALL FOR AN EMERGENCY EVACUATION MEETING.’

“It’s going out on all channels.” Mason claimed worriedly.

“Someone’s in the radio tower.” Juice knew that was the only way for that call to go wide.

“It’s a set up.” Stiles pulled out of his embrace, suddenly alert as the threat of impending danger renewed his focus. “They’re gathering everyone in one place for a mass execution. People have no idea what they’re walking in to.”

“We need to stop that broadcast and get to the town hall.” Opie laid out the tasks.

“I can go to the communications tower.” Mason volunteered. “Liam and I can go.”

“Not by yourselves.” Stiles bit his lip, contemplating the situation for a moment. “Pick up Tig or Bobby on your way. One of them needs to go with you. Opie, you and I will go to town hall.”

“Are you sure?” Juice didn’t like that plan at all, especially when he noticed the red coating Stiles shirt. “You’re bleeding.”

“I tore some stitches. It’s fine. I’m fine.” The younger man dismissed his concern. “I’m going. We’re going. You’re staying.”

“Obviously.” He wouldn’t make it far if he tried to go. “Be safe.”

The walkers surrounding town hall were all dead, put down by the people making their way into the building. Stiles and Opie swept the perimeter first, checking for explosives and booby traps, finding none. They entered through the front, with a crowd of other Charming citizens.
“Are we really evacuating?” Irene, the woman who ran the General Store, stopped them to ask.

“No.” Opie shot down any talk of that. “Excuse me, I need to speak with Chief Eglee.”

“She’s by the podium.” Stiles spotted the woman at the head of the room. “We need to have the deputies help us do a sweep inside of here. And we need to find a way to get these people out of here safely.”

“Easier said than done.” Opie murmured. “We have to work under the assumption that the main entrances are going to be blocked. Whoever wanted everyone in here won’t want them getting out.”

“There could be another reason they brought everyone here.” Stiles mulled over a different idea. “It leaves our supplies and resources unprotected.”

“It’s their back-up plan. If they couldn’t take this place by force, then they would take our supplies.” Opie theorized. “We took out most of their men. They don’t have a lot of options.”

“We can’t be a hundred percent sure what they’re doing.” They couldn’t put all their eggs in one basket. They needed to cover their asses. “We’ll need help. Go talk to Eglee. I’ll see who else is here that can help.”

“All right.”

Stiles eyes scanned the room as Opie trudged off. He found plenty of people he knew well, some who could help, and others who would need to be helped when shit went down. He saw Tig’s daughter Dawn and Bobby’s ex-wife Precious and son Tiki. Lowell was off by himself in the corner. Scott and the Hales were near the center of the room, chatting with…Theo.

The other man seemed a little too at ease for someone who was supposedly just another innocent bystander in this mess. If Theo wanted to fit in with the other people in the crowd, he should have been riddled with anxiety, tense with the fear of what might happen. His posture should not have been relaxed and he shouldn’t have been twirling a dagger around his index finger if he wanted to fit in.

It was the sight of the dagger that made Stiles see red. He stalked off to the other man, pushing past people without care, until he came to a standstill behind Theo.

“Hey Stiles,” Scott greeted him somberly over Theo’s shoulder.

“Stiles,” Theo turned to him with a wide grin on his lips, eyes flickering to the knife that sat heavily in Stiles grip. “It's nice to see you.”

"It wouldn't be if you knew what was about to happen to you.” Stiles unshealed his knife, twirling it absently in his hand, a mimic of what Theo was doing with his own. "How'd you think this was going to play out?"

"Oh, come on." Theo chuckled, his eyes flickering to the blade. "You're not going to kill me in front of all these peope."

The knife went smoothly into Theo’s throat, impaling his carotid artery. The blood spurted out around the blade, splattering across Stiles face and pouring over his hand. If Stiles was being honest with himself, the look of pure shock on Theo’s face was the best thing he had seen all day.
Hospital bed or not, there was nothing better than waking up to his wife’s beautiful face. She had curled herself up in the chair beside him, her posture rigid and tense, as if she might fall to pieces if she allowed herself to relax. The somber expression on her face was worrying, but did nothing to mar her features.

“Babe,” He mumbled, gripping the hand clutching his.

“You’re awake.” She smiled softly. “How are you feeling?”

“Good.” He had that floaty feeling that came with a considerable amount of painkillers being administered into his body. “How long have I been out?”

“About a day.” She brushed her fingers through his hair. “You scared me.”

“I’m sorry.” He brought their linked hands to his lips to kiss her knuckles. “How is everything outside?”

“Calm. They’ve finally finished counting the dead.” She admitted sadly. “The club’s been making condolence visits all morning.”

“How many?”

“Twenty-six.”

“Anyone we were close to?” Every life lost mattered, but Jax was more concerned about his friends and family at the moment. “I know about Kozik and the prospects. I saw their bodies at the gate right after the breach.”

“Margaret Murphy and Elliot Oswald.” Margaret worked with Tara since before the apocalypse, and Oswald had a long history with Charming and the Sons. “And two of Stiles friends, Isaac Lahey and Alan Deaton, they were at the farm with Oswald during the explosion, they were caught in the blast.”

“Does he know?” Tara nodded, but did not offer a word on how his brother took the news. “How are the wounded?”

“You and Harley took the brunt of it.” She adjusted the IV in his arm, as if she was trying to remind him he was hurt. “We’ve still got Harley sedated. She’s in the other exam room, where Juice was.”

“Where is he now?”

“He checked himself out.” Tara’s tone suggested Juice had done so against medical advice. “He
wanted to stay close to Stiles.”

“And Stiles wouldn’t stay at the clinic with him?” That did not sound like his brother at all. “What’s going on? Where’s Stiles?”

“He’s at the police station in a holding cell.”

“What the hell for?” Jax shot up into a sitting position, only to cry out in pain and fall back to the pillows. “Son of a bitch!”

“Careful.” She pinned a deceptively strong hand on his shoulder to keep him lying down. “You won’t be doing him any good if you hurt yourself further.”

“Why is Stiles in jail?”

“He killed Theo Raeken.”

“So?” Was there something he was missing here?

“There were a lot of witnesses.” Tara reported. “Jarry arrested him.”

“Of course she did.” That gash would do anything to shit on Stiles position in Charming. She believed if Stiles was out of the way, she could reclaim her post as sheriff. “Why hasn’t Eglee released him? She outranks Jarry.”

“She’s listening to the people of Charming and protecting Stiles in the process.” Tara explained, running a hand through her hair. “Opie’s working on getting it all straightened out.”

“I will straighten it out, right the fuck now.” He threw the blankets back, prepared to climb out of bed. “I’ll talk to Eglee and Stiles myself.”

“You can’t go anywhere.”

“I’m not going far.” The station was only a block or so away. “I’ll come right back.”

“I’m not gonna be able to stop you, right?” Her snappish attitude probably had something to do with the reoccurring theme of her patients checking out AMA. “Goddamn it, Jackson.”

“I’ll take the IV.” Jax hoped a compromise with soothe her worries. “And Chibs, in case something happens and I need medical attention.”

“And you’ll take a wheelchair.” She added. “I won’t let you walk out of here, I doubt you’d be able to if you tried. So, you take the IV, the wheelchair, and Chibs, and you come right back. Deal?”

“Deal.”

The metal bars of the cell were like ice against his back, the only warmth he felt was seeping from Juice. The other man was sitting in an identical position on the other side of the bars, ass on the cold floor, knees drawn to his chest. They hadn’t spoken much since Juice had shown up at the station while Stiles was being processed. They both seemed content to sit in contemplative silence, barely a word passed between them.

“Are you hungry?” Juice asked suddenly, as if one of their stomachs had just growled with the
“No.” Eating was the furthest thing from his mind. “You should eat something, though. You need to keep your strength up.”

“I’m not the only one injured here.” Juice grumbled. “By the way, Dr. Bishop said he would come by later to change your bandages.”

“I know.” Bishop had stitched him back up after Jarry had him moved into a holding cell. “Do you have a walkie-talkie on you?”

“Yeah.” Juice rustled around, unclipping the device from his belt. “The batteries are dead. Why did you want it?”

“I need to touch base with Mason, see how he’s handling things.” Stiles duties fell to the younger man while he was detained. “There’s so much to do. I’m not sure if I prepared him well enough for it.”

“He’s a smart kid. You said yourself that he could do your job by himself.” Juice hinted at his previous praise of Mason. “And if he can’t, you will be there to help him soon.”

“Yeah.” He supposed it helped Juice to believe that. “Will you do something for me?”

“What is it?”

“Will you go check on J-Jax for me?” He had not seen his brother since he and Opie left for town hall, and no one had given him any information on his condition. “I need to know that he’s okay.”

“If he wasn’t, someone would have told us.” Juice reasoned. “He was stable when I left the clinic. If we don’t get an update soon, I’ll go look in on him.”

“Thanks.”

“Where were you?”

“What?”

“After you guys brought Jax in, I saw you and it was like…you were there, but you weren’t there.” Juice shifted to face him, hissing as his casted foot dragged across the floor. “You weren’t in the moment, I guess. Where were you?”

“I was there, I was just at the cliff house too.” He had been flickering between two different times, between two different people. “I saw Jax lying on that gurney and then he would be my dad in the grass. I c-couldn’t differentiate between the two of them.”

There had been an overwhelming feeling of grief at the sight of Jax hurt and barely conscious on the hospital bed. Watching his brother’s face morph to his father’s was like a knife to his heart. He wanted nothing more in that moment then to take his brother’s place, to be the one on the cusp of death, if only so he would not have to feel the agony of loss once more.

“I never thought I would survive after I lost my dad.” He hadn’t wanted to survive. Slipping away seemed like the better option at the time.

“But you did.”

“I did.” The ghost of his father’s voice that lived in his head urged him to. “When I saw Jax with
blood pouring out of him, I realized that I couldn’t lose him too. Lose one and I’d survive, I would keep going even if I didn’t really want to. Lose them both and I would just…I would die too.”

“No, you wouldn’t.” Juice said firmly as the sounds of shuffling feet echoed down the hallway. “You did not survive because of a promise you made to your dad. You survived because you don’t know how not to.”

“He’s right.” Piney made his presence known, kicking Juice’s good foot as he stopped in front of the cell. “Take a hike, kid. Go get some food. Check on the baby. Whatever. I need to talk to the boy.”

“Uh,” Juice looked as if he might protest, but knew better than to argue with the old man. “Yeah. Okay.”

Juice used the cell bars to haul himself up to his feet, taking the crutches that sat against the wall to aide him. He reached a hand through the bars to squeeze Stiles shoulder gently, a promise that he would be back soon, before he limped away.

Stiles ducked his head as he stood up from the floor. He couldn’t bring himself to look Piney in the eye, too afraid of what he might find there. Piney was one of very few people left in the world that he could not bear to disappoint.

“Take this,” The old man shoved a moist towelette packet into his hands. “Clean yourself up.”

He ripped open the packaging and scrubbed away the dried blood that was caked to the skin of his face, neck, and arms, as instructed. He should have done it sooner, but Jarry wouldn’t allow it.

“How’s Jax?” He questioned hesitantly.

“He’ll be fine.” Well, that was informative. “How are you?”

“Fine.”

“What you told Juice says differently,” Piney commented carefully. “Your daddy and Jax, were they in your head when you walked into town hall?”

“No. It was everyone there and what would happen to them. When I saw Theo…” The world around him had clouded over and he had only one goal. “I knew what I was going to do, what I had to do. I didn’t have anyone in my head, not even me. It was just him and what I had to do to him.”

Everything had fallen away, the sounds, the people. It was a trance like state he found himself in, not unlike the one he had been in at the cliff house. It wasn’t a fiery rage or a need for revenge that drove him. There was no haze of anger, just a laser like focus on his task.

“I don’t feel good about what I did, but I don’t feel bad about it either.” Stiles would not lie and claim he felt anything resembling guilt or remorse. “What do you think that means?”

“That you’re still numb or you are just very good at compartmentalizing your emotions.” Piney speculated thoughtfully. “You don’t like to kill, Stiles, that is what separates you from the evil ones. You feel it, maybe it’s not remorse, but it’s something. You are not what you think you are.”

“What do I think I am?”

“A killer, but that’s not true. It’s what you’ve done, but it’s not who you are.” The old man extended a hand though the bars, hooking a finger beneath Stiles chin, lifting it so their eyes could
meet. “You are one of the good ones.”

“I don’t feel like a good person.” He never really had, even before the world ended. “The things I’ve done…”

“I’ve never known you to do anything out of malice. You do things, some of them awful, to protect the people around you.” Piney voice cracked, as if it broke his heart knowing that Stiles had to do those things. “It’s hard and it’s ugly. It steals a piece of you that you can’t get back. That is the sacrifice you make to keep your family safe.”

“What happens when I don’t have any pieces left to lose?” His breath hitched as he made his fears known. “Who or what am I then?”

“You don’t have to worry about that.” Piney assured him. “I’m never gonna let that happen.”

“What makes you think you can stop it?”

“I see you slip into that dark place, I’ll pull you back.” Piney promised, the strong lit of conviction in his tone. “Someone else can step up to bat.”

“I don’t want anyone else to have to.” If he could carry that weight, so no one else had to, then he would do it gladly, even as it destroyed him.

“Son, we have all killed to protect our families. It sits heavier with some of us than it does others.” The old man sighed. “It doesn’t make us weak. It’s the ones who write it off like it’s nothing that are weak, who are barely human. In this world, humanity is our greatest asset. It’s the ones that feel their actions, that make the hard choices only when it is absolutely necessary, even if it means breaking off a piece of themselves in the process, that are few and far between. Those are the people we need in this world.”

“Absolutely necessary…” That was the question, wasn’t it? Were his actions absolutely necessary?

“Gemma said you pushed Blythe to the floor once you became aware of the danger.” Piney mentioned approvingly. “That was your first instinct, to protect someone one you didn’t even really know. What was your first thought? While guns were going off around you, what were you thinking?”

“Get to the boys.” Abel and Thomas had been his priority, nothing and no one else had crossed his mind.

“How many men did you kill to get to them?”

“Three.” Two on his way to the school and one at Lowell’s house. “M-Maybe more. In the street, between the library and the diner, there were so many of us shooting, it was hard to tell who made the kill shots.”

“Did you kill them just to kill them or because they prevented you from getting to the boys?”

“Does it matter?”

“Yes. Let me put another spin on this for you,” Piney proposed. “Not once in his time with Charming PD did your grandfather Henry ever fire his weapon.”

“He was lucky.” Most officers were not as fortunate.
“The war was different. The first kill he ever made was to save my life.” The old man confessed solemnly. “There were more after that, we all got our hands bloody, and we all had our ways of dealing with it.”

“How did he do that?” How did his grandfather move on with his life when the war was over?

“He kept a journal, made an entry each time he took a life. It wasn’t because he was proud of it, the exact opposite actually. He needed to remember, he thought if he didn’t remember then it didn’t matter, when it did matter.” It sounded more like a form of self-punishment than a coping mechanism. “He was a religious man, you know. When he came home he prayed for forgiveness and understanding. It helped him get right with the things he had to do. I think that is what you need to do.”

“Pray? Keep a journal?”

“You need to get right with it.” Piney released his chin and cupped his cheek in a paternal manner. “How you do that is up to you, but it’s gotta be done or it will tear you apart.”

Jax liked Eglee, he did. They had gone to high school together. She was a friend and a good cop. That was why he didn’t feel good about barging into her office unannounced in the middle of the morning, but with the mood he was in, she was lucky he didn’t come in guns blazing.

“I know what you’re going to say,” Chief Eglee held up a hand as Chibs wheeled him into the office. “While I don’t agree with how Jarry handled the situation, I believe she was right to arrest Stiles.”

“I don’t care what either of you think.” They were both so obviously wrong. “You are going to let my brother out of that cell, right now.”

“You reinstated Charming PD for a reason,” Eglee folded her hands over the file she had been reading. “A crime was committed, a man was killed, a suspect was apprehended, and now there has to be an investigation.”

“That son of a bitch tortured Stiles. He let people into our town and killed our friends.” That man deserved what he got. “Any of us would have done the same thing.”

“The eye for an eye excuse did not hold up in court before and it doesn’t not hold up in Charming now.” Eglee admonished. “That is what this is about, Charming, the people of Charming. They want Stiles to be punished.”

“For what? Protecting the town? That’s bullshit.” They had no right to ask for retribution when all Stiles did was prevent more bloodshed.

“We know the facts, why Stiles did what he did, but outside of this department and the club, nobody has any idea who Theo was or what he did.” She argued tiredly. “To them, it looks like cold blooded murder.”

“Then we need to explain it to them.” It was that fucking simple. Jax was sure they would not agree with Stiles being locked up if they knew everything. “We call a meeting, lay out the facts, let them see what really happened.”

“That’s the plan.” She slid a flyer across the desk, which cited town square as a place and noon as
a time. “We’ve been handing those out and my deputies have been going door-to-door. It was Opie’s idea. I’m surprised you didn’t know.”

“I haven’t had a chance to talk to him.” Jax muttered, shooting a glare over his shoulder to Chibs. “Thanks for keeping me informed.”

“Sorry.” The Scot apologized. “He’s organizing it at the diner today. We’ll go by and talk to him before I take you back to the clinic.”

“I need to see Stiles first.” He set his gaze back on Eglee. “I want him out of that cell.”

“It’s for his own protection. He killed a man who he saw as a threat, now people see him as the threat.” Eglee acknowledged the full spectrum of the situation. “Someone could take things in to their own hands and Stiles could get hurt. I don’t want that to happen.”

“I can protect him.” It was his job to protect Stiles.

“After the meeting tonight, Jax.” Eglee negotiation skills needed some work if she thought that was going to fly. “I’ll release him to you after the meeting. Letting him go, just because you told me to, undermines my authority and sends the wrong message about this department and you.”

“Stiles won’t walk out if he thinks it will affect your status or how the people perceive you.” Chibs remarked. “He would wait until after the meeting.”

“Yeah. I know.” His brother would take Jax’s public perception into account over his own wellbeing. “I still want to see him.”

“You know where he is.” Eglee picked up a pen, content to get on with her work. “Go ahead.” Jax had been locked up enough, had seen enough of his friends in jail, that it didn’t really faze him anymore. Or so he thought. Seeing his baby brother behind bars was not something he was prepared for.

The gaudy yellow paint on the police station walls made him appear washed out, paler than usual, if that was at all possible. The dark bags beneath his eyes complimented the exhausted droop of his posture, a clear indication that he had not slept since he was arrested. The resigned expression hit Jax the most, as if the younger man had already determined how he would be punished.

“You okay, buddy?” Jax asked as Chibs pushed the chair toward the cell.

“Goddamn it, Jax.” Stiles snarled through the bars. “What are you doing out of bed? You were stabbed three times. You should be at the clinic!”

“Tara approved his temporary leave.” Chibs disclosed, hoping to halt Stiles onslaught of words that would surely voice his disapproval. “Relax.”

“Relaxation is not something I am capable of right now.” Stiles snapped at the Scot. “Jackson, you need to be at the clinic.”

“I’m fine, kiddo, I promise. I’ll be back there soon enough.” He just had a few things to get done first. “Look, there’s a meeting tonight. We’re going to tell everyone who Theo was and then you’ll be out here.”

“You really think it’s going to be that easy?” Stiles murmured dishearteningly. “Who Theo was, what he did, is not going to change what they think. The people in this town are never going to trust
“We built this place so people would have a safe place to go. They walk through the gates and they put their trust in us. They trust us to keep them and their families safe.” Family, trust, and safety were the only things they had left in this world. “You take one away and it all falls apart. They don’t trust me. If you and Eglee don’t hold me accountable for what I did, then they won’t trust you either.”

“They’ll think we’ll protect our own over them, that we don’t have to follow the same rules we set out for them.” Chibs caught on to Stiles thought process. “They’ll push against us, start to believe we’re dangerous. They might try to leave or take this place from us.”

“No one is going to take this place away from us.” They had spent too much time cleaning it up and putting it back together to let it be stolen from them. “If they want to leave, let them, I don’t care.”

“I do. I care.” Stiles clutched a hand to his chest as he spoke. “They won’t survive out there, Jackson, not long term. They have worked just as hard as we have to keep this place running. We can’t just send them on their way.”

“Well, we’re not leaving either.” Jax was not about to drag his family out on the road because of a few hurt feelings. “So, they will just have to fucking deal with it.”

“No.” Jax, Chibs, and Piney barked out their opposition to that particular idea.

“I’ll take the CB radio with me, so I can keep in touch.” Somehow, Stiles reassurance that he would call home while he was gone did nothing to comfort Jax. “I can survive out there, you know I can.”

“You are not going anywhere.” There was no way in hell Jax would allow his little brother to walk out of those gates. “Even if you were, I would be right beside you.”

“Juicy ain’t just gonna let you go anywhere without him.” Chibs made a good point, Stiles and Juice had become quite the inseparable pair over the last year.

“Juice can’t walk unassisted right now and he’s got the baby to think about. Jax, you wouldn’t leave Tara or the boys behind and you cannot take them on the road.” Stiles countered with his well thought-out reasons, it was almost like he had been expecting the argument. “No one needs to come with me. I’ll be fine on my own.”

“You will be fine, because you are not going anywhere. You are staying here with me.” They had spent so much time apart that Jax would not fathom being separated from his little brother again. “You can’t just…leave.”

“Let’s not make any rash decisions.” Piney suggested. “We’ll see how the meeting goes tonight and plan from there.”

“Okay.” Jax could agree to that.

“None of those plans involve you leaving Charming, Nathaniel.” The old man narrowed his eyes to
the prisoner. “Is that clear?”

“Yeah.” Stiles nodded.

“I need to talk to Opie about the meeting and get back to the clinic.” As much as Jax hated to leave his brother in a cell, he didn’t have much of a choice. “Are you going to be okay here?”

“Yeah. I’m fine.” Stiles brushed off his concern. “Juice will be back soon. I won’t be alone.”

“We’re gonna get all this sorted out, buddy. I promise.”

Opie had been sitting at the clubs designated corner booth at the diner for the better part of the morning. He had papers spread across the table haphazardly. He had a cold plate of eggs, which had been pushed off to the side the moment they were left on the table, and a cup of coffee that always seemed to be full despite how many times he drank from it.

“How’s it coming, sweetheart?” Gemma questioned as she filled the mug to the brim with hot caffeinated liquid.

“I don’t know.” He tugged on his beard anxiously as he scanned his speech for the hundredth time. “It feels like I’m going in circles.”

“You’ll figure it out, darlin.” She rubbed a hand down his back comfortingly as the bell above the entrance door chimed. “We’re closed!”

“Why?” Jax’s strained voice boomed through the diner as Chibs helped him in. “And before you ask, Tara let me out of the clinic for a little while, I didn’t escape.”

“You look like hell, baby.” Gemma frowned as she took in her eldest son’s appearance.

“I know, Ma.” Jax smiled reassuringly up at her as he and Chibs joined them at the table. “Why’s the diner closed?”

“I got tired of the assholes whispering bullshit about Stiles.” Her face scrunched up as if she just tasted something sour. “I threw them out and locked the place up for the day.”

“Yeah, well, don’t tell Stiles that.” Jax muttered with a heavy sigh. “He’s ready to fall on his sword for these people.”

“You’ve seen him?” Opie was so busy with the chaos in the streets that he hadn’t had time to visit their brother at the station. “How’s he holding up?”

“It’s hard to tell.” Jax shook his head. “I never wanted to see him behind bars.”

“Pop left to check on him a while ago.” Honestly, his dad was ready to bust heads when he had been told Stiles was arrested. “He still there?”

“He took off when we did, went to talk to Dr. Bishop about something.” Chibs told him. “Stiles won’t be alone long, he said Juice was supposed to stay with him for the day.”

“He picked up the baby and some food a few minutes ago,” Gemma waved a hand toward the playpen barely visible behind the counter. “Said he was heading back to the station.”
“Juice should bring that baby to the meeting.” Opie suggested. “People associate he and Stiles with each other. Stiles can’t be there, but Juice and the baby could show them as a family unit.”

“Who exactly is coming to this meeting?” Jax asked, taking Opie’s coffee as his own.

“Everyone.” It was mandatory for all residents. The only ones who would not be there were Stiles and whoever they had on guard duty. “We’re going to have a few people speak on Stiles behalf, then we’ll do witness statements, and take questions from people who weren’t in town hall during the incident.”

“What did happen at town hall?” Jax’s eyes jumped from Opie to his mother to Chibs and back again. “Why were you and Stiles even there?”

“A couple of Theo’s guys broke into the communications tower, killed Sergio, and sent out a call on the emergency channel telling everyone to get to town hall.” Opie relayed the short version of a long story. “Stiles and I went to check it out. When we got there, I went to speak to Eglee at the podium, and Stiles was supposed to round up some folks to help us canvas the building.”

“So what happened?”

“I talked to Eglee for about a half a second before the room went real quiet.” Aside from a few shocked gasps, it was dead silent. “I turned to see what was going on and I saw Stiles. He had a knife buried in Theo’s throat. There was blood splattered across his face, soaking his hands.”

“W-What else?” Jax was clearly shaken by Opie’s admission, but pressed on anyway.

“He put his other hand at the base of Theo’s neck.” It held the man up when he had begun to sink to the ground. “He pulled the knife free and shoved it into Theo’s skull, so he didn’t turn.”

That final blow was probably what startled the crowd the most. It had spooked them out of their initial surprise and allowed them to take in the gruesome event that had just taken place. The thump of the body hitting the floor and Stiles declaration of ‘it’s all okay now’ had only amplified the brutality of the situation.

“Jarry tackled Stiles to the ground and cuffed him.” It had been Opie’s instinctual reaction to stop her, to help Stiles, but the deputy was hauling him away before Opie could make it through the sea of people. “He didn’t resist. He went willingly.”

“That’s gotta count for something.” Jax was grasping at straws if he thought Stiles lack of resistance carried weight in the grand scheme of things. “Any of us would have done the same thing.”

“We would have taken Theo into custody ourselves, led him out to the sticks, and dealt with him there.” They would have done it quietly, in a way the town would never have known about. “I don’t think Stiles had the intention of killing Theo, it just happened.”

“We’ve all been there, right? The rage takes over and everything else shuts down. We’re left with nothing but to act on that anger.” Jax rationalized their brother’s actions. “What he did wasn’t… cold blooded murder.”

“Not to us, no.” Unfortunately, they were not the only pieces on the chessboard. “But to everyone else, that is exactly what it looks like. That is why we are holding the meeting. We’re going to explain it to everyone without coming off like a bunch of psychos.”

“Who do you have lined up to speak?”
“The Argents are going to offer their account of what happened at the wall. The kid who works at the communications tower with Juice and Sergio,” Opie rooted through his papers until he found one with the kid’s name on it. “Mahealani. He’s going to speak about what happened at the tower. And Nero will talk about his previous interaction with Theo, when he and Stiles were locked up at the theater in Sacramento.”

“Tara and Eglee are going to go over the forensic evidence. They matched the knife Theo had on him with your wound, it also had some of your blood still on it.” Chibs said as he stole a piece of bacon from Opie’s plate. “Tara’s going to try and wean Harley off the sedation for a little bit today, see if we can get her lucid enough to make an official statement about seeing Theo kill Kozik.”

“I want to speak too.” If anyone was qualified to speak on his brother’s behalf, it was Jax. “Don’t worry, I won’t go all ‘it’s my way or the highway’ on them.”

“The fact that you look like complete and utter crap can work in our favor.” Gemma commented. “So long as you keep your temper in check, I don’t see the harm in it.”

“I agree.” Opie nodded. “I’ll add you to the list.”

“All right. We need to get you back to the clinic.” Chibs took the handles of the wheelchair once more. “Tara didn’t give us permission for a pit stop and you need to rest before the meeting.”

“Fine. Let’s go.”

When Juice had returned to the station it was with a baby strapped to his back. The sight had Stiles laughing his ass off, which Juice had taken offense to if they way he dumpd the kid into his arms, after Eglee had allowed him into the cell, meant anything. The child was quickly followed by a container of food being shoved onto his lap and an order of ‘shut up and eat.’

“It’s too cold for this baby in here.” Stiles stated as he fixed a bottle into the baby’s mouth, shortly after he and Juice had finished eating their own meals.

“Like I told you before, he’s got two blankets keeping him warm.” Juice’s exasperation wasn’t unwarranted, Stiles had complained about the chill four times already. “Tara wants us to bond with him. She told me if I was well enough to the leave the clinic, then I was well enough to take care of the kid.”

“She’s hell bent on us taking him, isn’t she?” He knew why, she thought it would lock them down. They would be less likely to volunteer for runs if they had a child depending on them. “You’ve gotten pretty attached, huh?”

“Yeah, I guess.” The older man shrugged, a sheepish grin playing on his lips. “Thomas wants us to name him Batman.”

“Of course he does.” Thomas loved those comics, enjoyed it when Stiles or Abel read them aloud for him. “What do you think we should call him?”

“If we give him a name we’re staking claim in him. It means we’re keeping him. Are you ready for that?”

“He needs a family.” Stiles and Juice both knew how it felt to live without their family at some point in their lives. “And I, uh, I think you would make a good dad.”
“So do I. I mean, for you. You’d be a good dad.” Juice claimed adoringly.

“What’s his name then?” Stiles hadn’t spent much time with the kid, he figured Juice had put more thought into than he had.

“We’re both named after relatives.” That did seem to be the pattern their parents had followed. “I thought we could keep with that tradition, maybe not first names, though.”

“My dad’s middle name was Niculae. It’s a Romanian form of Nicholas. I think it means ‘victory of the people.’” It was a family name, passed down for generations. It felt right to pass it on once more. “I was always so fascinated by it, by the way it sounded. It’s so beautiful, John Niculae, it’s regal and strong, just like my dad.”

“Niculae.” Juice rolled the name over his tongue. “How about Niculae Antonio?”

“Antonio?”

“My older brother, Angela, died two years after I left Queens. His middle name was Antonio, for our mom, Antonia.” Juice’s voice grew tight, as it did every time he spoke of his family. “Niculae Antonio Ortiz-Stilinski, what do you think of that?”

“Stilinski-Ortiz rolls of the tongue a little smoother.” Stiles quipped. “It’s good. I like it.”

“Me too.”

“Hey, you aren’t keeping him at home yet are you?” He spared a glance to Juice’s broken foot. “You’re still hurt an-“

“I was with you all night.” Juice reminded him. “And we still don’t have any baby shit at our house, so there is no way to care for him there.”

“Our house…” He caressed his index finger over the baby’s forehead. “I’m glad it’s that one we chose. It’s important that it’s that house.”

“Why?”

“It was the house my dad grew up in.” His childish handprints were in the cement of the sidewalk and his height chart was still marked in the doorframe of the kitchen pantry. “He inherited it after Henry died. He never sold it. It sat empty from the day Dad left for the Marines until you, Chibs, and I moved in.”

“He never had any plans for it?” Juice questioned curiously.

“I think it was his way of holding onto his dad.” Even if he never really went back to the house after he moved out, he always knew it was there. “I guess he and I both have trouble letting go.”

“You’ve been talking about him more. That’s progress.” Juice praised through a load yawn.

“You’re so tired.” Stiles lifted a hand to rub the blemishes under the older man’s eyes. “Why don’t you go home and take a nap? This little guy is going to need one when he’s done with his bottle. You could curl up together.”

“I don’t have time.” He glanced down at his watch. “Opie wants me and the kid- Niculae- at the meeting, but I don’t really want to go.”

“You should.” It would help them show a united front, so to speak. “It would be a bad idea if I go. 
If they see me, they’ll think about what I did. If they see you and the baby, they’ll think of me as a family man or something.”

“Pretty much, yeah.” Juice worried his bottom lip between his teeth. “I just don’t want to leave you here by yourself. I’ve got this nervous feeling in the pit of my stomach, like if I leave something is gonna happen here and I don’t want that.”

“Hey,” Stiles shifted the infant in his arms and placed his hand delicately on the man’s chest, over his heart. “It’s okay. Nothing is going to happen. It’s gonna be fine.”

“Stiles…”

“I love you.” The spark of pleasant surprise in Juice’s eyes spread warmth throughout his body. “And I know how this is going to go today. I’m telling you that one way or another, it’s all going to be okay.”

“I believe that you love me.” Juice brought his hand up to kiss his palm. “But I also believe everything else that just came out of your mouth is complete bullshit.”

“Then hold on to your belief in my love for you.” Hopefully, it would be enough to get Juice through this mess. “Can you do that?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I can do that.” Juice assured him confidently. “I, um, I love you too.”

“I know.” He had known that for a long time now. “You, uh, you said you had to get to that meeting soon.”

“Yeah, I do.” He sighed. “I should get going. Opie might want to talk to me beforehand.”

Juice retrieved the baby pack thing from the bunk and slipped it on, adjusting the straps until they were comfortable. Stiles pulled the bottle from Nicolae’s mouth, took the time to burp him, and carefully secured him into the carrier. He picked the crutches up off the floor and helped Juice stand, not moving his hands until he was sure the older man was steady.

“Guard!” He shouted sarcastically to the deputy on duty.

“I’ll see you later.” Juice leaned in to kiss his lips. “I’ll come back after the meeting, to bring you home.”

“Okay.” He went in for one last kiss as the guard opened the cell door.

“Let’s go, Ortiz.”

“I’m coming.” Juice grumbled, brushing against Stiles as he exited the cell. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Stiles watched Juice go with a heavy heart. He knew, later on, Juice would think he was a bastard for saying those words. He would believe it was Stiles way of saying goodbye, and that was part of it, sure, but honestly, he wanted to say them at least once. He wanted Juice to hear those words pour from his mouth and see the love shining back at him in Juice’s eyes. It was all had had left to give.

He was losing what he had with Juice today. It was more than simply a lover and a friend. It was the life they could have had and the family they could have been. It was a sacrifice it killed him to
“That’s the thing about the truly righteous,” Peter Hale drawled as he stepped out from the shadows. “They tend to end up alone.”

“I’m not righteous.” He was the furthest thing from it, just ask the majority of people living within the confines of Charming.

“Why? Because you’ve killed?” Peter tilted his head to study him. “It is how we survive in this world. We’ve all done it.”

“Not all of us.” There were a lucky few that had been saved from committing that particular sin.

“Those who haven’t killed are only alive today because someone did it for them.” The wolf drummed his fingers against the bars. “Like Scott, for instance. He hasn’t had to get his hands dirty, because the rest of us do it for him.”

“Scott would never condone any of you killing for any reason.” It went completely against the True Alpha’s strict moral code. “Even if it was to save his own life.”

“Just because he doesn’t know, didn’t see it, doesn’t mean it never happened.” Peter remarked sardonically. “He needs to believe that a kind gesture can heal the evilest of souls. If he doesn’t, it will destroy who he is. So, we don’t tell him about the scavenger groups that have attacked us on runs or the ones who attacked our camp while he was off searching for supplies.”

“What’s your point?” Besides the fact that Scott was blissfully ignorant to things his pack was doing.

“No one has clean hands. No one.” Peter shook his head. “You know that, yet you are still willing to walk away so none of the people you were protecting will feel the guilt of sending you on your way, even though they are all well aware that you did what you did to make their lives safer.”

“It is not what I did that scares them.” The residents of Charming were not stupid, they knew it was a kill or be killed world. “It’s where I did it, in front of everyone, and how I did it. Knowing it happened and watching it happen are two entirely different things.”

“So, you will leave everything you built here?” Peter spread his arms wide, a gesture to the entire town not just the station. “You will leave everyone you love just to soothe a few ruffled feathers?”

“If I stay, it would send a bad message.” A few ‘ruffled feathers’ were the least of his worries. “It tells them that killing is okay or that certain people can get away with anything if they have the right connections. It sets a dangerous precedent that could set off a chain reaction.”

“And you think your leaving will prevent that?”

“It would show them that none of us are above the law. No one could claim that Jax, the club, or the police department is playing favorites.” It would seem as if he had been banished as punishment for his crimes. “I’m not going to put my brother in the position to save me from Charming’s judgment. I will not let him hold the weight of that guilt when he fails. It is my choice, my decision. Jax and Juice will hate me for it, but at least they’ll be in a safe place while they do it.”

“You will have twenty minutes or so to gather supplies you’ll need for your trip. I can slip out during the meeting to distract the guard at the wall, allow you to exit the gate undetected.” Peter offered his assistance further by using his supernatural strength to pry open the cell door. “You
won’t be able to take a vehicle without being spotted, so you’ll be walking.”

“Why are you doing all of this?” Stiles had called on Peter for the sole purpose of getting the cell open, not to aide him in his plan to get out of town. “I mean, I appreciate it, but why?”

“’Cause I like you, Stiles.” Peter grinned wolfishly, a mischievous glint in his eyes. “And people like us are not meant to be caged like rabid animals.”

Jax’s annoyance at the need for a meeting only grew the longer it went on. It was all right at first, listening to Nero speak about the theater and Mahealani about the communications tower. It all started to go downhill around the same time the Argents and Harley gave their testimony about the carnage at the gate. The crowd seemed almost bored as Tara and Eglee went over the forensic evidence they had found on both Theo and Jax. It was only after Tara and the Chief stepped down that the real bullshit started.

“Do you really expect us to believe any of this?” Jarry scoffed as she stood from her chair in the front row.

“Which part are you having trouble with, Deputy?” Opie, who was leading the proceedings, ran his fingers through his beard, a visual interpretation of his aggravation.

“All of it.”

“Shocker.” Juice mumbled under his breath, low enough for only Jax to hear from his seat right beside him.

“Every single person that has testified has reason to lie.” Jarry claimed hotly. “Harley, Nero, and the Argent’s are Stilinski’s people. Most of them are from Beacon Hills and he let them in here. Dr. Knowles is his sister-in-law, of course she would manipulate the evidence to suit her needs.”

“Dr. Knowles, as she stated during her testimony, did not do the forensic testing herself, that was Dr. Bishop. She is here delivering the results, while Dr. Bishop is otherwise detained at the clinic.” Opie’s impatience at Jarry’s inquiries leaked into his tone. “As for Stiles letting Harley and the Argent’s in to Charming, I’d like to remind you that he let the majority of those currently present today in as well.”

“He knew them previously, from his time in Beacon Hills.” The deputy reiterated her point. “If I’ve heard correctly around town, the Argent’s were part of Stilinski’s original group.”

“If you ‘heard correctly’ you also heard that Argent’s and that original group left Stiles to burn to death.” Jax felt like an asshole for bringing it up, especially since the pack had been helping out a lot recently, but desperate times called for desperate measures. “They’ve got no loyalty to him.”

“They would lie to get back on his good side and yours.” Jarry reasoned.

“And you could be so ready to tie a noose around his neck because he and Jax backed the council’s decision to reinstate Charming PD with Eglee as chief, not you.” Juice countered, earning more than a few approving nods from the crowd.

“Everyone’s intentions can be called into question.” Jax spoke loudly to be heard over the whispers in the crowd and over the fuming deputy. “Honestly, the intentions do not matter, the facts do. Twenty-six of our people are dead. Theo killed some of those people himself, and his friends killed
“So says you.”

“Who do you think is behind all this, Jarry?” Jax could not be more perplexed by the deputy’s continuous presumption of a conspiracy.

“I think you would say anything to save your brother. I think you would sell an innocent citizen, who hadn’t been in town long enough for any of us to meet, down the river to protect Stiles.” Jarry crossed her arms over her chest defensively. “Or, maybe you figured that our food supply would stretch further without all the people in town wanting a piece. Take us all out, until the population was back down to you and yours, and our dwindling food supply would last a hell of a lot longer.”

“Wait a damn minute. Jax, hold the kid.” Juice dropped the baby onto Jax’s lap and struggled to stand without his crutches. “Stiles and I were nearly killed trying to find enough food for this entire town, you ungrateful bitch. While you were sitting pretty in your warm home, Theo was yanking off Stiles fingernails.”

“And SAMCRO wasted valuable resources trying to rescue you.” Jarry’s mistake was in her failure to deny Theo had been the one to torture Stiles, Jax counted that as a win. “You came back empty handed.”

“Actually,” Irene, from the General Store, piped up. “Mr. Padilla, who Stiles and Juice met in Sacramento, gave us a semi-trailer full of canned goods. We haven’t made a formal announcement about it, because we’re still inventorying. At the current count, we have more than enough food to last us well until we get our crops growing again.”

“And a lot of us saw strangers in the streets with guns and machetes.” Lowell spoke up to debunk the deputy’s conspiracy theory. “One broke into my house with a shotgun. Stiles saved my life.”

“Why should we believe you?” Jarry snorted derisively. “You are one of their people.”

“Anyone who speaks against you is either Stiles’ or ours.” Chibs muttered with a huff. “Why don’t you put a lid on your vendetta, it’s got no place here.”

“This meeting is about what happened at town hall, nothing else.” Jax tried to bring the focus for the real reason they were there. “Stiles killed Theo, no one is denying that. The fact is, it was not murder. He was neutralizing a threat.”

“What he thought was a threat.” A woman Jax vaguely recognized, but couldn’t put a name to, called out from the crowd. “The rest of us in town hall just saw a normal guy.”

“Theo integrated himself into the chaos so he looked like just another innocent bystander.” Jax had to give credit where credit was due, it was a smart move. “But he wasn’t innocent and Stiles knew that. Look, I know what happened was awful and hard to watch. It was something none of you should have had to see.”

“We did see it. My daughter,” The woman pulled a young child close to her. “She saw it.”

“I’m sure she saw worse when you were outside the walls.” Jax snapped sharply. “Like I said, none of you should have had to see it, but we can’t rewrite history and wash it away. It happened. Stiles neutralized a threat an-“

“Who gave him the authority to do that?” Jarry asked and Jax really wanted to ask who gave her the authority to traipse around his town like she owned the place, until he remembered he was the
one to let her in. “Was it you? I thought you reinstated Charming PD to prevent things like that.”

“Stiles reacted in the moment and was driven by emotion.” They couldn’t very well fault him for that. “Theo kidnapped Stiles and Juice in Sacramento and tortured them. He then infiltrated Charming, killed our people, and stabbed me. Stiles arrived at town hall and saw him shooting the breeze with all of you, acting as if none of it ever happened. Stiles acted on emotion and the instinct to protect each and every one of you from the threat you didn’t even know was there.”

“Can we just,” Juice stomped a crutch to the ground in frustration. “Can any of you remember what it was like to be on the road? Do you remember the constant threat to your lives and the lives of your family? It wasn’t just walkers that wanted to kill you, it was humans. Maybe not all of you, but at least some of you killed to protect your family.”

“The night of the breach, our town was in danger. All of those things that the walls kept out were inside. People broke in and tried to kill us all.” Jax had a thrumming of pain in his back as proof of that. “While most of you hid in your houses, the rest of us were out there fighting, killing, to keep you alive. Does that make us murderers who should be hanged or banished?”

“We’ll take the silence as a ‘no.’” Opie decided. “The only difference between what Stiles did and what we did was that you saw what Stiles did, and you can’t get it out of your minds. It is easy to remain ignorant to what we did, because we made sure you didn’t see it.”

“We all have a lot to think about.” Jax noted a number of conflicted faces in the crowd. “We aren’t going to decide anything today, although Stiles is going to be remanded into my custody until a proper solution can be found. Right now, we’ll take some questions, and then we’re all going to go home and put some hard thought into what we learned today. We will reconvene in two days.”

“I want you all to think about one thing while you are going over all this in your heads later,” Piney stepped forward to speak for the first time since the meeting began. “It was Stiles idea to open the town to strangers. Not one of you would be in here, safe and cozy, if not for him. He did not want any of you to be out there fighting to survive. He thought you deserved better. Just think about that, please.”

He watched the meeting from behind the cover of an old oak tree in the park, just east of the town square. He wasn’t entirely sure why he was punishing himself by listening to Jarry question his motives while Jax and the others tried their damndest to defend him. Perhaps he was holding on to some shred of hope that everyone would understand what he had done. However, the fear and mistrust on the faces of nearly every person he allowed in to Charming was enough to tell him he was making the right decision by leaving.

He turned away from the proceedings while Juice was shoving Nicolae into Jax’s arms. He hitched the pack of supplies he had picked up from his house higher on his shoulder as he slipped away before he could be spotted. He started on the narrow path the far side of town, where he had one last stop to make.

The cemetery was one of the most carefully maintained places in Charming. The lawn was well tended to and there was not a grave marker in sight that did not have a small bundle of flowers resting against it. The elderly in charge of the burial grounds wanted to ensure the dead that they had not been forgotten.

Stiles weaved around the plots, following a trail he had only been down once before, passing his
brother Thomas’s grave without much thought. He walked through a few more rows until he came upon the one he went searching for, located a stone’s throw away from his Uncle Nathaniel’s plot.

“Hi Grandpa.” He crouched in front of the headstone that read, Henry Nicolae Stilinski, 1944-1985, Devoted Father, Loving Son, Loyal Friend. “I think when Dad brought me here I was still Nathaniel, but I’m Stiles now, if that, uh, if that matters.”

He barely had any recollection of being brought to this gravestone when he was a little boy. The trip didn’t mean much to a four year old, but it meant everything to him now.

“When I decided to come here, I had every intention of giving this to you,” He removed his father’s badge from his pocket, skimming his thumb over the emblem. “I want to do that, I do, but I’m just not ready. I still need it. I still need him.”

He suspected it would always be that way. He needed a physical representation of his father, the same way his dad had needed the house he grew up in to hold on to Henry. They could both say goodbye in their own way, but they could never truly let go.

“You will take care of him for me, won’t you?” There was an irrationality to asking the dead to care for the dead, but no one had ever accused Stiles over being a rational human being. “He was alone for so long after he lost you. I don’t want him to be alone now.”

The club had gathered in the diner for an late lunch after the meeting. Jax was in the corner booth once again, with Opie, Piney, and Chibs. They were waiting, not-so patiently, for Chief Eglee to return with Stiles. Of course, Jax was keenly aware of what the Chief would find when she went searching for his brother. The haggard expression she was wearing as she stalked into the diner only proved to solidify his younger brother’s predictability.

“Stiles is gone. Someone opened his cell door and he just walked right out.” Eglee placed her hands on her hips, looking as if she had hit her stress limit. “Just like we thought he would.”

“Yes.” Jax had known Stiles had flown the coop since Peter had given him the signal upon returning to the meeting. “Piney, you get him the back-up I requested?”

“Yeah. He’s tracking him now, leaving markings so we know which way they went. Stiles won’t suspect a thing.” That was probably wishful thinking on the old man’s part. Stiles would notice his tail before long. “Did one of you fill Juice in?”

“No, I thought he’d let something slip to Stiles.” Opie cast a timid glance to the younger Son who was half-asleep in a booth at the other end of the diner. “He’s gonna be pissed.”

“I’ll leave you boys to deliver the bad news.” Eglee bowed out of the discussion. “I’ve gotta keep Jarry from blowing a gasket, inciting a riot, or organizing a manhunt.”

“Do what you can, darlin.” Piney urged as the woman trudged off. “Which one of you idiot’s is going to tell Juice about Stiles?”

“I vote Chibs.” Jax volunteered the Scot.

“I second that.” Opie raised a hand.

“Chibs it is.” Piney grinned wryly at the chosen messenger.
“You bloody bastards.”

There were tricks Stiles learned from being on the road that never really left him. He knew how to time his steps precisely to match a walker’s, so the crunch of leaves or snap of a tree branch did not draw their attention. He knew on-sight which berries were safe to eat and which herbs had healing properties. And he could sense when he was being tailed, the fact that the person hunting him sucked at it, only made it easier.

He allowed himself to be pursued through the forest for five miles before he abruptly veered off course. He left the safety of the woods in favor of the open pavement of the highway.

“I’ve felt someone following me since I left the station.” He scolded the man’s pisspoor tracking skills as he twisted around to face him. “What the hell are you doing out here, Dr. Bishop?”

“It’s Jamie.” The older man corrected. “I saw you were leaving. I didn’t think should you be out here alone.”

“Is that right?” It sounded like a crock of shit. “Were you planning to drag me back kicking and screaming?”

“No. I was going to come with you.”

“You were just going to leave your mother behind?”

“My mom is safe in Charming. I can go back and see her at any time.” Well, Stiles couldn’t argue with that. He wouldn’t be turned away at the gates if he did go back. “I need some space from her, even if it’s just for a little while.”

“Why?” Most people tried their hardest to stay with their families in this world, not willfully separate themselves from them.

“A few weeks ago I found out I had a brother who lived with our father, a man I was told was dead.” There was no masking the betrayal written on Jamie’s face.

“He is dead.” Henry had been dead for quite some time.

“My mother told me he died in the war, when I was a baby.” Okay, so Henry had not been dead quite that long. “I saw the newspaper clipping about his death when I was looking you up in the county records. He died when I was fourteen.”

“Why does that matter now?” It wasn’t as if they could turn back the clock and give Jamie back the time he missed with his father.

“She kept him from me. She kept them both from me. All I know about them is that my dad was a cop and my brother played baseball in high school, and he apparently had a son with the matriarch of a biker gang.” Jamie looked completely dumbfounded by that last one.

“So?”

“I know you can’t tell me about Henry, but you can tell me about my brother. I could ask my mom, but she can’t tell me what she doesn’t know, and I can’t trust anything she says in regards to my dad or yours.” The other man glared off in to the distance, his resentment toward his mother’s
secrets showing in the tense set of his shoulders. “I want you to tell me about your dad. That’s why I followed you. And it’s dangerous for you to be out here alone. If I had been in my brother’s life, I think he would have wanted me to look out for you if he wasn’t around to do it.”

“I can look after myself.” He turned on his heels, making his way back into the forest. “You’re welcome to tag along, if you can keep up.”

“Where are we headed?”

“Home.”
Chibs had seen Juice through plenty of hard times, stressed out, strung out, depressed, pissed off, and wound tighter than a bowstring. Until now, he had never witnessed the full range of those emotions all at once. It was a bit frightening, to say the least.

The younger man had been pacing the length of the diner since Chibs had broken the news about Stiles. It wasn’t an easy feat considering he had ditched his crutches and was dragging his injured foot across the floor. He probably would have been pulling his hair out if it were long enough.

“You should have fucking told me!” Juice growled, focusing his anger solely on Chibs and Opie, for a reason Chibs would bet had something to do with their shitty luck.

“We’re telling you now.” The withering glare he received for the comment had him shrinking back in his seat.

“We were trying to keep it on the down low.” Opie explained, shifting uncomfortably under the younger man’s scrutiny. “It was need-to-know only.”

“And I didn’t need to fucking know?” Juice snarled with such ferocity that it had the VP flinching uncharacteristically. “Screw you, Ope.”

“All right now, Juicy.” Chibs stood, strategically placing himself between the two men before they could come to blows. “Calm down.”

“Fuck you too.” Juice pushed him away, hysteria blending with the anger in his voice. “You knew Stiles would leave and you didn’t try to stop him. W-Why the hell could you just let him go?”

“It was Jax’s idea.” Opie said suddenly, pointing a finger at the Son not currently present. “If you want to know why, you should ask him.”

“Fuck that.” Juice bent down to retrieve his crutches from the floor. “I’m going to go get Stiles.”

“How do you plan on doing that?” Chibs cast a pointed glance to the kid’s foot. “You can’t ride with that or your ribs the way they are.”

“I can drive.” He only needed one foot to work the pedals of a vehicle.

“I’ll come along.” Chibs volunteered to accompany the boy on the trip.

“No, it’s just me.” Juice’s tone made it clear there was no room for arguments. “I’m gonna go pack up the Jeep.”
"You don’t even know where you’re going.” No one but Piney was privy to the trail Jamie was leaving to mark the direction they had gone.

"There is only one place Stiles would go and that is Beacon Hills.” The younger Son deduced as he limped to the diner exit. “He’s got a head start on me, but he’s on foot. I’ll close the distance quickly in the Jeep, or better yet, I’ll just beat him there.”

"Be careful.” Chibs order would probably be ignored if the middle-fingered salute he got in return meant anything.

"He seems tense.” Opie noted as they watched Juice trudge out the door.

"That’s putting it mildly.” Chibs couldn’t really blame him, given the situation. “Oh, and uh, nice job throwing Jackie-boy under the bus.”

"When it’s a family problem, I’m allowed to throw him under the bus.”

The sun was beginning to set when Stiles made the executive decision to take a break. He told Jamie it was so they could get some food in their systems, when really it was so he could rest. The exertion from the walk was hell on his injuries, both new and old.

They detoured west off the highway to look for shelter, finding it in what used to be an old burger joint in Happy Valley.

“Is it just me or is this town creepy?” Jamie observed out the window as they secured the door. “There’s no one around.”

“No walkers either.” The town was completely deserted. “It’s like whoever cleared this place took the bodies with them.”

“I don’t know whether to be grateful or terrified by whoever did it.” Jamie muttered.

“Unless we’re kidnapped, I’ll settle on grateful.” Stiles decided, hopping on to the counter when he failed to find a chair to sit on. “We’ll rest for an hour then hike into Beacon Hills through the preserve at nightfall.”

“We should change your bandages before we leave.” The doctor removed the first aid kit from his pack, laying it out on the counter. “There’s dirt caked into the ones on your fingers, let me see them.”

“Did you steal that from the clinic?” He questioned as he held his hands out obediently.

“It’s the kit I came through the gates with.”

“So, you haven’t asked me about my dad yet.” Stiles mentioned conversationally, hoping that speaking of his father would take is mind off his physical pain. “That’s why you wanted to come out here with me, right?”

“Right.” Jamie murmured, unwrapping the dressings on Stiles fingers. “Did you get the savior complex from him or did that develop on its own?”

“I don’t have a savior complex.” And he did not appreciate the derisive snort he got in response to the claim. “If I did, why is that a bad thing? I like helping people, so did my dad. That is why he
became a cop. Well, that and because it’s the family business. He wanted to follow in Henry’s footsteps.”

“Oh.”

“Why did you become a doctor?”

“I wanted to help people.” Jamie admitted sheepishly. “Were your dad and Henry close?”

“Yes.” That happened sometimes when you were raised by a single parent. The love and affection that would normally be split between two parents was focused on only one. “Are you and your mom?”

“Yeah. I mean, I thought we were. I’m not sure now.” The doctor dabbed peroxide soaked cotton balls over Stiles nails. “The newspaper articles said that John was a pretty big baseball star in Charming.”

“He had a sports scholarship to Stanford, but he didn’t take it.” He could have been drafted to the major leagues, had he kept up with it. “He decided to join the Marines instead, like Henry had.”

“Was that your plan too? Join the Marines right out of high school and then join the police force? Become a soldier then a cop?” Jamie pondered as he delicately wrapped new bandages around his fingers. “I’ve only known you a short time, but you seem like both those things.”

“I have a bit of an authority problem, which would not have boded well for me if I joined the Corp.” His father never would have allowed him to join the military anyhow. “I was going to go to Berkeley, earn joint degrees in criminal justice and criminal psychology, and then join the police force.”

“Berkeley?” Jamie quirked a brow. “Mom was an art history professor there.”

“Oh.” To the best of Stiles knowledge Blythe had been an art teacher at Charming High School when she was with Henry. “So, um, you said earlier that Blythe only told you about my dad a few weeks ago. I guess that means she never talked about him or why she left.”

“No. She never said anything. She does have a small tattoo on her wrist, it’s initials, JNS, and a birth date. Until I found the county records, I didn’t know it was your dad’s initials and birth date.” The older man gestured to a place on his own wrist. “I don’t know why she left him or Henry. To be honest, when she told me I had a brother, it didn’t really register. I mean, two days before that, I had seen my wife be torn to pieces. Knowing I had a brother didn’t matter after watching that.”

“That’s understandable.” No one could fault him for that. It was natural for his mind to be on his wife, not the brother he had never known.

“Meeting you and having Mom bring him up more…” Jamie dropped his hand and turned to the medical kit, picking at a loose string by the zipper. “I want to know about him. I want…”

“A connection.”

“Yes.” He nodded slowly. “I just don’t know if that’s possible.”

“I had another brother, through Gemma. His name’s Thomas. He died before I was born.” Stiles, like Jamie, never had a chance to know his older brother. “I always knew he was my brother, the same way Jax was, but at the same time, because I never knew him, it always felt like he was just Jax’s brother.”
He and Thomas shared blood and nothing more. There was no bond, no memories. Jax had loved Thomas, had played and fought with him, had mourned him. Thomas was a part of Jax’s life, his history, not Stiles.

“I also had a sister, who was stillborn, through my dad and my mom.” It was a topic he never broached, not even to Jax. The only two people in the world he ever spoke to about his baby sister were gone now. “She never took a breath outside of the womb, but I still have a connection to her that I never had with Thomas. I saw her ultrasound, listened to her heartbeat, and felt her kick inside my mother’s stomach. I loved her. I grieved for her.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I understand why you don’t feel a connection to my dad. You should know, though, that he always had one to you. Blythe taking you away didn’t sever the tie between you.” His father never let go of that bond, because he was old enough to remember it was there. Jamie had been far too young when he was taken away to remember anything. “You’re the reason my dad let Jax be in my life. Gemma wanted him to take me and leave, but he didn’t want Jax to go through what he went through.”

It was a testament to how deep the wound left behind by Blythe’s action was in his father’s heart. There was never any closure, no way for him to heal properly. There was no grave to visit because Jamie hadn’t died like Stiles sister or Thomas. He was just gone, taken to an unreachable place his dad could never visit.

“I can’t give you the connection you are looking for.” He could tell Jamie every little thing about his dad that he had stored in his memory, but it would never fill the void that absence left. “But if you saw how Jax and I are together, then you saw how close we are, and how much we love each other. We are only able to have that because of how much my dad loved you. You will never have that connection, but knowing that he never stopped missing you or loving you has to be enough.”

“It is.” Jamie grunted gruffly, eyes red with unshed tears. “It will be.”

The meeting at town square had been mandatory, but no one in the pack, aside from the Argents, could bring themselves to attend. Deputy Jarry had tried to convince Scott and the Hale’s to go, to testify about Stiles behavior the night Theo was killed, but they had refused. They might not all have agreed with what Stiles had done, but they were not going to help Jarry turn him into a monster.

Instead, they had busied themselves planning makeshift funeral services for Isaac and Deaton. It wasn’t until Chris and Allison had returned with the news of how poorly the meeting had gone, that Scott made the decision to speak with Stiles himself, only to find out he was missing. He and Derek scoured through a few blocks in Charming, hoping to pick up his scent, and wound up at the Teller-Morrow garage, where Stiles friend Juice was packing up the Jeep.

“You’re going to look for Stiles.” Scott declared, earning an unimpressed glance from the older man.

“Nothing gets past you.” Juice deadpanned, hobbling around to load a gas can into the back of the vehicle.

“We can come with you.” Derek offered their assistance in the search.
“No.”

“You’re hurt.” Scott pointed out unhelpfully.

“Thank you, Captain Obvious.” Juice scowled at the alpha. “You are still not coming.”

“You’ll triple your chances of finding him if we go with you.” Derek attempted to use logic to appeal to him. “Are you really going to turn your back on more help?”

“I don’t need your goddamn help.” The older man snapped, slamming the hatch of the Jeep closed. “I already know where he’s going.”

“Bu-“

“He’s got this.” Jax assured them as he limped over from the clubhouse.

“He should have back up.” Scott and Derek were more than willing to watch out for him.

“Once he gets to Stiles and Dr. Bishop, he will have back up.” Jax leaned heavily against the Jeep as he spoke. “He’ll be fine. Don’t worry.”

“What are you gonna do when you find Stiles?” The Alpha asked Juice, who seemed mildly irritated by the continuing interruption to his preparations. “Drag him back against his will?”

“Fight with him or fuck him.” Juice shrugged as he pulled open the vehicle door. “I’ll decide in the car.”

Jax couldn’t help but snicker at the dumbfounded look the wolves shared in reaction to Juice’s bluntness. They were obviously not expecting the Son to be so honest about his intentions regarding Stiles.

“Like I said, he’s got this.” He reiterated his previous sentiment. “I understand that you lost two friends during the attack. I’m sorry for that. If you’d like to go speak to my mom, she can put you in touch with the ladies who organize burials.”

“We’ll do that.” Derek wrapped his fingers around Scott’s bicep, guiding him a few steps back from the Jeep. “Thanks.”

“Gemma’s at the diner, so now would be a good time to do that.” He not-so subtly urged the wolves away. “I need to talk to Juice in private.”

“Oh. Okay.”

Jax waited for Scott and Derek to exit TM’s parking lot before turning to Juice. The younger man didn’t spare him a glance as he climbed into the Jeep, shutting the door with a forceful slam. Jax rapped his knuckles against the driver’s side window until the kid rolled it down so they could speak.

“You sure you’re okay to drive?” As confident as he was that Juice could handle himself, injured or not, there was no harm in checking.

“Are you sure Stiles was okay to walk out the gate?” Juice shot back, narrowing his eyes at his club Pres. “Because I’m not. He’s hurt and his mind was clouded. He is in no shape to be out there
on his own.”

“He’s not by himself.” Jax would never allow his baby brother to be outside the walls without backup. “Dr. Bishop is with him.”

“Oh, well, if Dr. Bishop is with him then I guess it’s all okay.” Juice drawled sarcastically. “What the hell were you thinking? You knew he would leave and you just let him.”

“One way or another he would have found a way to leave. I just took some control over how he did it.” When Stiles made up his mind about something, nothing could stop him. So Jax had two options, alter his plans in secret or chain him to the radiator. “He wouldn’t suspect Bishop as much as he would anyone else.”

“What game are you playing here, Jax?” The younger man leveled his suspicious gaze at him. “You wouldn’t let him go without a surefire way to get him back.”

“That would be you.” He knew the moment Juice found out Stiles was gone that he would go riding after him, the Jeep in place of a noble steed. “Juice, I know you’re pissed about this, but it needed to happen. He needs to stay away long enough for word to get around.”

“Why?”

“These people need to realize that he was willing to leave, to put himself in harm’s way, just to give them peace of mind.” He hoped it would smooth things over, let the town come to terms with what Stiles had done without him being present. “Once they do, they’ll welcome him back.”

“That is a fantasy, Jackson.” Juice shook his head at the idea. “They will never welcome him back with open arms, no matter what he has done for them. They’re too damn selfish for that.”

“Let me handle them.” He could be diplomatic and charming. One of those traits would assist him in making them understand. “You go get Stiles. If he needs to go to Beacon Hills, for whatever reason, then let him. Just have him home within two days or I’m sending out a search party.”

“Given our track record, that search party may happen either way.” Juice quipped halfheartedly. “I should get going if I want to beat him to Beacon Hills.”

“You think he would risk making the trip in the dark?” It seemed more likely that he would stop somewhere, rest, and start up again in the morning.

“He won’t go in to town tonight, but he will get as close as he can.” Juice drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. “That is where I will meet him.”

Piney had been waiting for this particular visit since the meeting had ended. He made a point of being at the cemetery she found him, so they could get the two conversations they needed to have done at once. It just made sense that the confrontation would take place in front of a man they both cared for, or his headstone anyway.

“You sent my son outside the walls.” Blythe said in lieu of ‘hello’ as she stalked toward him.

“I told him Stiles was leaving and he volunteered to tag along.” Piney corrected, settling onto a bench near the gravesite. “He wanted to look after his brother’s son.”
“He wouldn’t do that. I mean, he would, but he would tell me if he was going somewhere.” She tugged anxiously at a lock of her hair, a movement Piney recognized from Stiles. “He wouldn’t just leave.”

“Like you didn’t just leave Henry and Johnny?” He countered hotly. “Maybe he wants you to feel how they felt.”

Blythe recoiled at the accusation, a reaction he expected and took pleasure in eliciting.

“They won’t be out there for long. They’ll be coming back.” Their past friendship was to blame when he felt compelled to offer her that assurance. “Before they do, I would like a few questions answered. I can tell you now that Stiles is not going to let you speak to him, even if he wanted answers. However, he will listen to me.”

“You want to know why I left.” She sighed, sitting down beside him on the bench.

“I do.” Henry was one of his oldest friends and she had broken his heart, he only wanted to know why. “You left Henry when he needed you most.”

“I was so happy when he came home. He was hurt, but I knew he would get better. We were going to be a real family again once he was released from the hospital. It was going to be wonderful.” She smiled wistfully. “But, you know, that first visit to the VA hospital terrified me.”

“I remember.” He had escorted her there himself. “It was a lot to take in.”

“He was so thin, his body was so broken. I didn’t know what to think when I walked into his room. Henry, though, he just smiled at me and suddenly I had my love back.” A tear fell down her cheek as her eyes found her husband’s grave. “Johnny didn’t falter at Henry’s appearance. He moved a chair close to the gurney, used it to climb up onto the bed so he could give his daddy a big hug. And Jamie just followed his big brother’s lead.”

“As brothers do.” Stiles and Thomas had been the same way as children, always trailing after Jax and Opie. “Sounds like everything was going fine, despite Henry’s injuries. What changed?”

“There was a family that lived down the street from us. They went to our church, the husband was part of Henry’s regiment, the daughter played with Johnny and Nathaniel. Everything seemed good for them too. One night the wife showed up at my door, scared out of her mind.” Blythe swiped the tear track from her face. “You could hear her husband screaming from down the block. He was having some sort of flashback.”

“He pulled a gun on the deputies who were called to the house.” Charming was a small town, if something went down everybody knew by morning. “They had to kill him.”

“From that point on, I kept wondering when Henry would snap. When would the war catch up with him? When would he start screaming and hollering about enemy soldiers? When it happened, would he hurt me and the kids or just himself?” Her breath hitched as she continued. “I went to visit him the next afternoon. He was sleeping, so I just sat there watching him. He started having a nightmare. He was twitching and jerking about, woke up yelling.”

“We all had nights like that when we came home.” Piney could remember waking up in a cold sweat, the feel of mud on his skin and the scent of gunpowder in his nose. “Some of us still have ‘em.”

“I took it as a sign that it was only a matter of time before Henry became violent. I couldn’t risk my babies getting caught up in that.” She yanked a lock of hair once more, if only to give her hands
something to do. “He was the most gentle man I had ever met. He never even raised his voice at me. Still, I thought the war could have changed him, made him angrier.”

“You decided to leave to prevent something that might have happened.” He could understand her wanting to protect her children, but she was forgetting one important detail. “Why did you leave John behind? If you honestly thought Henry was capable of hurting someone, why did you leave your six year old alone with him?”

“I had every intention of taking him with me, but when I took him to see Henry one last time my plan changed.” Her eyes flickered from the headstone to Piney. “I went to grab him from Henry’s room when I was done talking to the doctors. He was curled up with him in bed. Henry was reading to him. He wasn’t listening to the story, though. He was watching Henry, mesmerizing his features. I think he knew what I was gonna do.”

“He was a perceptive kid.” It was something Stiles had inherited from him.

“He looked up at me and had the most heartbroken and betrayed expression on his face. He grabbed a handful of Henry’s hospital gown, buried his head in his chest, and kept saying ‘don’t make me go, daddy’.” Blythe wrapped her arms around her middle and began rocking back and forth as the memory came to the forefront of her mind. “I knew that I couldn’t take him from his daddy. So I took him home, unpacked his bags, and the next day I drove him to school like it was any other day.”

“Except you didn’t pick him up when the school day was over.” Her husband and son never saw her again. “Why didn’t you and Henry talk it out? You could have shared custody of the boys. Jamie could have had a father. John would have known his mother.”

“Because I loved Henry too much.” She cried out hoarsely, as if the words were being torn from her throat. “I couldn’t see him, be around him, without being with him.”

“That’s a copout.” That excuse may have held up if she had only been absent from John and Henry’s lives for a few weeks, maybe months, but not for the rest of their lives. “Henry had his issues after the war, problems with his injuries and PTSD, but he was never violent. He never hurt Johnny or anyone else. If you had checked in once in a while, you would have known that and you wouldn’t have had to be without them. You could have been a family.”

“I made mistakes. I know that.”

“The reasons for your mistakes are not going to mean a damn thing to your grandson.” Her explanation would likely give Stiles another reason to hate her, not bring understanding or forgiveness. “That kid has the Stilinski spirit and the Madock temper. And I believe he’s used up his forgiveness quota for the next five years.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means the decision you made to leave had a ripple effect that spanned generations.” She did not just walk away from her son, but to his future children and grandchildren as well. “If you wanted to know your grandson then you should have been there for his father.”

“I was going to reach out to John one day, to explain myself.” She twisted the watch round her wrist, revealing the tattoo inked beneath it. “I never found the time. I thought there would be more time.”

“There’s never more time.”
Stiles rarely stuck to main roads or highways while traveling. The openness of the streets made it easy to be spotted. He liked the woods, felt safest nestled between the trees and bushes. It was the near perfect camouflage.

“Do you see that?” Jamie stopped him, jutting a finger out toward the road.

They were a mile away, but the sight was visible through a pair of bushes. It was a hazy yellow glow coming off the street. The closer they got to it the clearer the image became, it was an arrow drawn in the pavement with luminescent paint.

“It’s pointing to Beacon Hills.” Stiles kept hidden behind a tree as he gazed down the road.

“There’s more of them. From here, I’d say there is one painted every couple of miles.”

“Do you want to check it out?”

“Not tonight.” It was too dark and their position could be easily compromised. “We keep on our original trajectory. There’s a place not far from here with shelter. We can camp for the night, start fresh in the morning.”

He turned away from the road, returning to the dirt path they set off on earlier in the evening. He was a little put off by the lack of walkers ambling around the woods and road, but he figured he would worry about the reason behind that later. For now, he was content to lead Jamie through the forest until they successfully reached their destination, located deep in the preserve.

The Hale property was just as he had left it over a year prior. The burnt out husk of a house was still abandon, an overgrowth of plant life surrounding it. The white ‘X’ painted on the remains of a load-bearing wall was the only notable change.

At first glance, the tunnels were just the same, empty. However, upon further investigation, Stiles found that was not the case at all. There was a small fire blazing just past the tunnel entrance, kept under control by a pile of rocks circling it. Sitting next to it was someone Stiles really should not have been surprised to see.

Juice was hunched over as far as his broken ribs would allow. His leg with an injured foot was stretched out in front of him, resting precariously close to the warm stones. The sullen expression on the older man’s face made Stiles want to get on his knees and apologize for putting it there.

“There’s a room back there.” Juice jerked a thumb toward the far end of the tunnels. “It looks like it was used to torture people. I doubt it’s very comfortable, but you’ll be sleeping there, Dr. Bishop.”

“Uh,” Jamie sent a nervous glance to Stiles, who motioned for him to go ahead. “Sure. Okay.”

“I left some blankets in there, and food and water.” Juice let the other man know as he retreated to his designated quarters.

“So,” Stiles shifted awkwardly on his feet, focusing on the flames of the fire so he did not have to meet Juice’s eye. “Where do I sleep?”

The attempt to ignore the elephant in the room fell flat. Juice had no response for him. He didn’t yell or shout. He simply stared Stiles down, his features morphing until they were void of all emotion.
“I know you’re angry.” Stiles had given him plenty of reasons to hate him. “I want you to know that I left Charming. I didn’t leave you.”

“What’s the difference?” Juice questioned, voice tight from the effort it took to keep his temper in check. “You leave Charming for good and you leave me too. As the only guardian to a kid your sister-in-law dumped on us, I wouldn’t be able to go on runs. There would be no way for us to see each other if you weren’t in Charming.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t…” He hadn’t thought about it that way. “I didn’t want to leave you or my family. I just had to get out of there.”

“Why? Because of Theo? The meeting was-“

“Pointless.” The meeting was a useless attempt at changing stubborn minds. “The people there will never look at me the same. They won’t accept anyone I let through the gates. I won’t be able to do my job.”

“So do a different one.” Juice instructed, as if it were that easy. “You hate your job, you think it’s boring as shit. Mason likes it, he can do it. It’s time for you to take a step back, to relax. You’ve done enough for Charming.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“It is that fucking simple.” The older man insisted. “You’re gonna come home with me. We’re gonna heal up and do the domestic thing, and we’ll figure out the rest later.”

“You still want to do that with me?” He asked hesitantly, taking a seat beside Juice on the log. “Even after I left?”

“It’s only been a couple hours.” Juice draped an arm around his shoulders. “I’m willing to write it off as temporary insanity.”

“That theory may hold some substance,” Stiles admitted, leaning in until they were nose-to-nose. “I did cuddle with Gemma the other day.”

“Good God.” He snorted loudly. “There is something very wrong with your head.”

“Obviously.” He chortled, lifting a hand to trace a finger over Juice’s jaw. “That a deal breaker?”

“No, but leaving is.” Any trace of amusement left Juice’s voice. “You don’t get to do that to me again, not unless you mean it.”

“I’m sorry. I won’t do it again.” He promised, putting every ounce of conviction he could muster behind it. “I didn’t only say ‘I love you’ because I was leaving. I said it because I do and I needed you to know it.”

“I knew it long before you said it.” Juice brushed their lips together. “I meant it too.”

“Yeah. Yeah. I know.” He caressed the other man’s cheek with his thumb. “We can’t go anywhere tonight, and there’s something I want to do tomorrow. Tonight, we should just…rest.”

“Yeah. Rest.” Juice nodded, a sly grin playing on his lips. “I made up the back of the Jeep for us to sleep in. It’ll be a tight fit, but it’s better than the hard ground.”

“Oh.” Stiles stole a glance at the vehicle that was parked several feet away, hidden within the
tunnel. “Well, you should put out the fire and I will be in the Jeep getting ready for yo- for bed.”

“Right. For bed.” The older man brought their lips together for a fervent kiss, breaking it with a smirk. “Lubes under the pillows.”

“Since when do we have pillows?” They had pillows at home, sure, but they never brought them on runs.

“I stole them from the inn. I figured with your stomach and my ribs, we would have trouble getting comfortable without them.” Juice murmured, not bothering to hide the way his eyes roamed over Stiles shirt-covered torso.

“Good call.” He snuggled against the older man, resting his head on his shoulder and wrapping his arms loosely around his waist.

“I thought we were going to bed?”

“In a minute.” They hadn’t had much time to be physically close in over a week, having spent the majority of it in hospital beds and then a jail cell. “Let’s sit in front of the fire a little longer.”

“You cold?”

“No.” He mumbled, nuzzling Juice’s throat. “But you’re warm.”

“That’s the fire.”

“No, it’s not.” The warmth he felt had nothing to do with the flames. “It’s you.”

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The trio started on foot toward Beacon Hills shortly after dawn. They kept in a straight line, Stiles in front, making sure the path was clear so nothing could trip Juice up with his crutches. Jamie took up the rear, swiping a tree branch across the dirt to cover their tracks.

“I’m a little disappointed.” Juice confessed as they made the trek. “These woods are empty. I wanted to put down a walker with one of my crutches.”

“You wanted there to be biters trying to kill us?” Jamie scrunched up his face quizzically.

“Quiet. Both of you.” Stiles commanded, holding up a fist to halt their movements as well as their conversation. “We’re here…I think.”

“What in the hell is that?” Juice’s eyes went wide as they took in the sight before them.

There was a tall wall where Beacon Hills should have been. Spotlights were anchored atop the wall, spaced evenly every thirty feet or so. There was a guard post, directly to their left, housing two men dressed in full military garb.

“Back up.” Stiles urged his companions, pushing them to take cover behind a pair of trees.

“Fort Beacon Hills, Est. 2016, United States Armed Forces.” Juice read off the words stamped in large print on a gate beneath the guardsmen’s post. “You think it’s legit or some group trying to capitalize on peoples need for a safe place to go?”

“I take it this wasn’t here the last time you came through?” Jamie acknowledged, taking in their
semi-shocked states. “What do you want to do?”

“We’ll circle around. See what we see.” They couldn’t just walk away. Beacon Hills was too close to Charming. If the enemy moved into their backyard, they needed to be aware. “We stay out of sight and as quiet as possible.”

The perimeter walls sat the edge of preserve, and extended around the town. As strong and stable as the walls looked, Stiles could tell from the slightest gap between the group and the metal, that they weren’t permanent. They were temporary, made to be moved or taken down.

There were signs of the beginning of a future development when they reached the east side of the property. There was a short wooden fence surrounding rows of crops that looked as if they had been recently planted. A small cabin, still in the process of being built, sat opposite the wall, next to an RV and tool shed.

“Okay, so…” Stiles couldn’t help but shake his head at the ridiculous of it all. “Beacon Hills is walled up, but a tiny little farm is sitting right outside of it. What’s with that?”

“We were getting a jump on the expansion.” A male voice announced, drawing their gazes toward the town.

“Where the hell did you come from?” Jamie took a protective stance in front of both Stiles and Juice.

“There’s a door right there.” The older African American man nodded to the door that almost blended in with the wall. “Ya’ll were too busy gawking at my crops to notice.”

“Uh huh.”

The man didn’t seem the least it perturbed by their presence. He walked past them to the shed, removing gloves and a rake. His lack of reaction put Stiles and Jamie on edge, while it annoyed Juice more than anything else.

“Okay. You know what? No.” Juice threw his crutches to the ground dramatically. “We’ve already been tortured once this month. We’re not up for round two.”

“What?” The older man’s brows rose comically high on his forehead.

“Just do us a favor and kill us quickly.” Juice shoved his hands in his pockets, thoroughly done with the entire situation.

“Son, you trespassed on my property.” The man said slow and calmly, as if he were afraid to spark another outburst. “I’m not holding you here against your will.”

“Right.” Juice scoffed disbelievingly. “The moment we try to leave…”

“You will be free to go.” The man waved a hand to the forest. “Wherever it is you came from.”

“You are making a great first impression, Juice.” Stiles shot his lover a look that told him to reel in the attitude, before he addressed the stranger. “I’m sorry, sir. We meant no disrespect. We apologize for trespassing. We were just passing through.”

“No harm done.” He shot a wary glance to Juice, then turned his focus back to Stiles. “Is your friend always so paranoid?”
“Actually, I’m usually the paranoid one and he’s more levelheaded.” He and Juice were apparently
switching roles for the day. “I guess we swapped personality traits in the middle of the night.”


“No. No. I promise we’re mostly sane.” Stiles was quick to reassure him.

“Mostly?”

“I don’t want to oversell it.” He didn’t want to lie to the guy and say they were completely sane,
stable, individuals. “I’m Stiles, by the way. That’s Juice and Jamie.”

“Vernon Boyd.” The stranger introduced himself.

“The second or the third?” Stiles inquired timidly.

“The second.” Vernon answered guardedly.

“I went to school with Vernon Boyd the fourth.” Stiles could see the resemblance between the
Boyd he had known and the man standing in front of him. “We got out of Beacon Hills together
with our other friends. The rest of his family didn’t make it out.”

“I was living in Florida when the virus hit. I tried to get back, so I could check on my son and
grandkids, but I didn’t make it in time.” Vernon explained, a hopeful expression overtaking his
features. “Do you know where my grandson is? Can you take me to him? Can you bring him
here?”

“I’m sorry.” He hated this part, telling someone their loved one was gone. It was something that
happened far too often in this cruel world. “I wasn’t there. I don’t know how it happened. I just
know he’s gone. I’m sorry.”

“I guess…now I know.” Vernon cleared his throat pointedly, rubbing a fist at the corner of his eye.
“You’re from Beacon Hills then?”

“I am. Yeah.” He wouldn’t offer anything more than that about himself. “It was a dead zone when
I was here last. Only walkers and scavengers.”

“We cleaned it out fairly quickly when we got here.”

“We?”

“The military and some willing civilians.” Vernon rolled up his shirtsleeve to show off the USMC
tattoo on his forearm. “I was retired from the service for a long time, but this world brings out the
soldier in you.”

“So a couple old military members formed a group to settle in Beacon Hills?” It would not be
Stiles first choice for a military compound, but perhaps they saw something in it that he didn’t.
“Why not the old base at the coast?”

“This isn’t just some camp survivors put together.” Vernon leaned his rake against the fence and
dropped the gloves, as if sensing this would be a long conversation. “This is an official refugee
center set up by the United States Armed Forces.”

“I think I speak for all of us when I say, what?” Jamie exclaimed. “The military was disbanded
with the rest of society.”
“It shrank a bit, but it’s not gone. When the infection got bad, and the original refugee centers started closing up, the orders were to get to Kansas, to the headquarters they set up.” The old man furrowed his brows as he took notice of their blank stares. “You honestly don’t know, do you?”

“I thought that was obvious.” If they had any idea what he was talking about then they wouldn’t be so surprised by it. “What is the headquarters? Is it just a big refugee center?”

“Basically.” Vernon nodded. “It’s more or less located in the middle of the country. Survivors flocked there for safety after seeing the heavy military presence.”

“Is the headquarters still intact or is it gone?” If it were overrun, it would explain why they were setting up shop somewhere else.

“It’s still there and bigger than ever.” Vernon’s voice was full of pride over the accomplishment. “We need more room. People want to go home. We’re getting them as close as we can.”

“Seriously?” It was hard for Stiles to believe that any of it was possible. “How did you do all this?”

“I can’t speak for everyone. This is the first place I’ve helped set up. The people in charge have done it before, that’s how we got this one up and running so quickly.” The older man glanced to the door he had come through. “Do you want to meet them? Take a look around?”

“Normally, I would say no.” Stiles knew it was a bad idea, but at the same time, he could not resist the ache of longing in his heart. “But there’s something in there that I need to see.”

“Let’s go on in.”

Stiles, Juice, and Jamie took their previous positions as they followed Vernon through the door into town. There was a checkpoint located just inside where they had to sign in and hand over their weapons before the soldiers allowed them to go any further.

“What do you think?” Vernon questioned when they were given the ‘all clear’ from the guards. “Not bad, right?”

‘Not bad’ was the understatement of the century. The streets were clean, not a speck of blood or brain matter to be seen. The buildings were freshly painted, the lawns were cut, and the flowers watered. If Stiles didn’t know any better, he would think Beacon Hills had been untouched, frozen in time since the very beginning.

“It’s great.” Stiles couldn’t keep the astonishment from leaking in to his tone.

“We’ll go to the command center first.” Vernon decided. “You can meet the local representative.”

“All right.”

“Hey, why is your farm outside?” Juice asked the older man as he guided them through town. “Wouldn’t it be safer in here?”

“People gotta be outside the walls before they come in.” Vernon reasoned. “I wanted to be the first thing my family saw when they came back.”

The conversation lolled to silence with that statement. They were all aware his family wouldn’t be coming back to him. Stiles felt for him. He knew what it was like to have the hopes of a family reunion dashed. He’d gotten lucky, finding out the brother he believed was dead was alive and well. It was the kind of story that was not told enough.
“As you can see, Beacon Hills wasn’t entirely unscathed.” Vernon turned their attention to the residential area in the west side of town, most of which had been burned to the ground. “A scavenger group must have come through and torched the place. We’re still cleaning it up.”

Stiles eyes caught on the familiar neighborhood. The street signs were gone, but all he had to do was look three blocks past the old library to find the house on the corner. His house.

“Stiles?” Juice called out his name in a whisper.

“It’s gone.” His breath stuck in his throat as he took in the remnants of the home he had shared with his father.

“Is that why you wanted to come here? You wanted to see the house?”

“Maybe. I don’t know.”

He dropped his gaze to the road, unable to stomach the sight any longer. He counted the faded yellow stripes on the pavement as they continued on to their destination. He made it to forty-seven before they arrived.

“Bobby,” Vernon greeted a new presence as they came to a standstill outside the police station. “Got some new kids for you to show around.”

“Oh, really now,” A shrill voice Stiles recognized all too well snapped him out of his grief stricken funk. “Holy hell, is that Bilinski?”

“Oh my god.” Stiles covered his face with his hands to muffle his groan. “How did he even survive?”

“Come here, kid.” The man pulled him into a bear hug before he could protest. “Good to see you. You’re the first one of our old team that I’ve seen since I came back to California.”

“Good to see you too, Coach.” He patted Finstock’s back awkwardly. “Please let me go.”

“Huh?” Finstock seemed confused until Juice nudged a crutch between them and he got the picture, untangling himself from Stiles and stepping back. “Sorry about that.”

“Don’t do it again.” Juice hissed. “He doesn’t like hugs from weirdoes.”

“Says the guy who used to flush panties down the toilet for a good time.” Stiles muttered low enough for only Juice to hear. “My weirdo needs to get a handle on that temper.”

“I’m sorry.” Juice flashed the coach an apologetic smile all the while jabbing Stiles in the foot with a crutch. “It has been a long couple of days. I’m a little on edge.”

“This your whole group, Bilinski?” Finstock ignored Juice in favor of opening the entrance door to the station. “Come on in here.”

“No, this is isn’t everyone.” Stiles told him as they were ushered into the building. “We have a camp a couple hours south of here.”

“This is our command center of sorts.” Vernon informed them, gesturing to the maps on the walls and radios on the tables. “We’ve got satellite phones and long wave radios to keep in touch with headquarters and our other bases. We’ve been trying to get in touch with other towns, but haven’t been very successful.”
Stiles left his companions to chat while he wandered off to explore the station that had been his playground as a child. The receptions desk had been his top hide and seek spot. The door to the right led to where the K9 unit once trained, where Stiles liked to sneak off to when things got busy. Just past the bullpen was his favorite room of all.

He didn’t even realize his feet were moving until he somehow wound up in front of the office. The curtain on the door was pulled up, giving him a full view of the inside. His heart clenched painfully in his chest when he saw what they had done to it.

Everything that made it his father’s office was gone, replaced. From the pictures on the desk to the fishing hat on the coat rack to the ‘Sheriff’ that was once stenciled on the glass. It was cold, unfamiliar, and wrong. Worst of all, his dad wasn’t there.

It was irrational, he knew. He thought he could come back to Beacon Hills, to the station, and find his greatest loss, just as he had found Jax in Charming. He expected to find his father sitting at his desk working, complaining about the health food Stiles would always bring him.

“Hey,” The line of Juice’s body felt comforting against his back. “Are you okay?”

“He’s not here.” He pulled his eyes away from the office, glancing up at Juice. “He’s not here.”

“I’m sorry.” Juice cupped a hand to the nape of his neck and brought their foreheads together. “I’m so sorry.”

“I wanna go home.”

“Your house is gone, baby.” Juice reminded him gently.

“This isn’t home.” Not now, not anymore, and never again. “I want to go home. Back to Charming. I n-need Jax.”

“Okay. We’ll get Jamie and we’ll go.”

“I shouldn’t have just left. How could I have done that?” He had spent so long on his own, without his brother, and when he finally finds some stability, he runs off to chase ghosts.

Jax was at TM when the group came through the gates. He had not anticipated them returning quite so soon, or for Dr. Bishop to be driving the Jeep when they pulled into the parking lot. For a moment, Jax thought Juice had resorted to tying Stiles up and tossing him in the back, until he saw his brother climb from the passenger seat.

The kid looked utterly devastated, as if his world had just come to a crashing halt. He didn’t wait for Juice or Jamie to exit the car. He trudged past them all and into the clubhouse. Jax didn’t need an invitation or any cajoling to follow him.

“Everything okay, buddy?” He asked the younger man who stood in the middle of the room, staring at the wall of mug shots like they held the answer to every question he ever had.

“Dad and I came here before we left Beacon Hills. We were looking for you. I checked everywhere.” The younger man’s voice trembled as he spoke. “Your house, Gemma’s, even Piney’s cabin. You weren’t there. You weren’t here.”
“Chibs said this place got overrun pretty quick.” By the time Jax and the others had broken out of prison, the club and their family had been forced out of Charming by the dead.

“There were walkers everywhere. There were so many that I couldn’t make out any faces. I couldn’t be certain that you weren’t one of them. So, we killed them all. We went in hand-to-hand.” Stiles made a slicing motion with his hands. “I had to know if you were here. If you were alive, you would have been here.”

When Jax and the club had returned to Charming, the clubhouse had been cleared out. The chainlink outside had been padlocked closed. There was nothing but the scent of rotting flesh coming off the bodies of the biters lining the grounds. Biters put down by the Stilinski’s, apparently.

“I checked them all. You weren’t one of them. I was so sure that you were dead, but you weren’t.” A relieved sigh escaped the kid’s parted lips. “For years I believed you were dead, but when I came back, you were here. You were all here. You were alive.”

It had been a struggle for Stiles when he first came home. Jax could remember the long looks his brother would give him and the subtle touches. The younger man needed physical proof that they were not all figments of his tormented mind.

“It should have been different with my dad. I saw him die. I buried him. But after finding you, I thought…” Stiles began sobbing, tears wetting his cheeks. “I went to Beacon Hills to find him and he wasn’t there. He was supposed to be there. You were here. He was supposed to be there. He wasn’t there, Jax. Why wasn’t he there?”

“I’m sorry, buddy.” He wrapped his arms around his little brother, pulling him in close, and feeling his body shake from long held grief.

“My dad is dead.” It was the wording that struck Jax the most. Stiles had always been so careful about his word choice. His dad was always gone never dead. “He’s really dead.”

“I know, buddy. I’m sorry.”

As much as it pained him to see his brother go through the grief of losing a parent, he knew it had to happen. Stiles had been putting it off for so long, holding out hope for something that would never happen. Now, he understood, he could accept and finally begin to heal. After all, acceptance was the final stage of grief, the tipping point to goodbye.

Chapter End Notes

Apocalyptic tales are as much about learning to say goodbye as they are about survival.
The sun was barely peeking over the horizon as two soldiers led Scott and Derek to the helicopter. The loud whir of the blades made Scott nervous as they climbed into the chopper beside the men who would be traveling with them, PFC Gallo and Sergeant Hernandez.

“We’ll have a car waiting for you when we land in Bremerton.” Hernandez marked the location on the map he held out in front of him. “If you are not back by sun-up tomorrow morning, you will miss your return flight. If you miss your return flight, the next one is not available until next week. Is that understood?”

“Yes sir.” Scott nodded in case the Sergeant couldn’t hear him over the roar of the engine.

“Are you sure there will be enough room for our…package?” Derek questioned as he worked the straps of the seatbelt.

“Myself and Private Gallo will remain in Bremerton to continue setting up our base there.” Hernandez again marked the same spot on the map, as if they had already forgotten where they were going. “It will just be the pilots, the both of you, and your package making the return trip.”

“What is your package?” Private Gallo spoke up for the first time since their initial introduction. “If you don’t mind me asking.”

“It’s…um,” Scott struggled to find the right words. “I don’t um…”

“It’s a retrieval mission for us.” Derek answered when Scott faltered. “We left something in Port Angeles. We need to bring it back.”

“What makes you think it’s still there?” Hernandez’s skepticism was not unwarranted considering the circumstances. “Other groups could have taken what you left behind.”

“They wouldn’t have taken this.”

Scott and Derek had not spoken to the pack about this trip. They would find it unorthodox, unnecessary. They would never understand that it was something Scott had to do for himself and for Stiles. Derek had decided to accompany him for his own reasons, which Scott did not ask about, but he was sure had to do with the other wolf’s deceased parents.

“We really appreciate you taking us along so we could do this.” Honestly, Scott was sure they would have been shot down the moment they went to ask about joining the run.

He and Derek had headed to Beacon Hills the day after Jax had made the announcement that it had been reestablished by the military. They spent two weeks getting to know the people who were in charge. They helped out where they could, built trust. They had earned the right to accompany the
soldiers on their trip.

Jax was unrecognizable even to himself in the mirror. His hair brushed down to the side, instead of pushed back or spiked up as it normally was. His baggy jeans were replaced by ones that fit a little too well, if the visible curve of his ass was anything to go by. His SAMCRO t-shirt and kutte had been switched out for a soft sweater that was a size too big, the sleeves long enough to cover his knuckles.

“I look ridiculous.” He muttered to his reflection.

He left the bathroom with a huff and let the sounds of the house lead him into the packed kitchen. His mother was at the table feeding the baby in her arms. Tara was at the counter pouring a cup of coffee. Juice and Stiles were both cooking at the stove, which was not as odd as it would have been a few weeks prior.

Since his return from Beacon Hills and subsequent breakdown, Stiles had stuck pretty close to Jax, and Juice had kept close to Stiles. It was sweet and a little worrying. Stiles had not followed Jax around like a lost puppy quite so much since he was a little boy. At this point, the only time they were apart was when Juice and Stiles went home for the night. Other than that, Stiles might as well have been surgically attached to Jax’s hip.

“Morning.” He greeted his family as he entered the room.

“Morn….” Tara’s eyes went comically wide at his appearance. “Uh, morning.”

“Where are the boys?” His sons could usually be found conning Juice into sneaking them chocolate chips that were supposed to be for pancakes if the other man was cooking, but this morning they were noticeably absent.

“Outback playing.” Stiles did a double-take over his shoulder at Jax as he spoke. “Why the hell do you look like that?”

“You told me to make a good impression.” He was meeting with the people in charge of Beacon Hills later in the day, and he had been advised to be on his best behavior. “The best way to do that is to appear harmless and unassuming.”

“I appear harmless and unassuming.” His brother retorted. “You look like an awkward guy about to ask an over-protective father if you can take his daughter to dinner.”

“Shut up.” He scowled at the younger man as he sat down opposite Gemma at the table.

“You even washed your hair.” His mother noted, running a hand through his soft locks.

“He doesn’t even wash his hair for me.” Tara grumbled with a shake of her head.

“Stiles is right, you got ready for a first date not a first impression.” Juice quipped as he continued to flip pancakes.

“Shut up.” He repeated, making a mental note to change into his normal attire before leaving the house to avoid further ridicule. “Stiles, do you have your things together?”

“For what?”
“You’re coming with me to Beacon Hills.” It was something he should have discussed with the kid beforehand, but he assumed Stiles wouldn’t mind. “So you can introduce me to Vernon and Finstock.”

“I thought…. Well, Juice and Jamie met them too. One of them can go with you.” Stiles worried his bottom lip between his teeth. “I have to stay here with the baby.”

The baby, Nicolae, had become Stiles first line of defense, Jax had come to realize in recent days. His brother held the child like a shield in the rare occurrence that he found himself out and about around town without proper back-up. The infant’s presence calmed him and kept people like Jarry from openly confronting him.

“I can take him to the communications tower with me.” Juice offered, earning a glare from Stiles in response. “I can set the playpen up in the office.”

“Scott and Derek are there. They can make the introductions.” Stiles attempted to wiggle his way out of the trip once more.

“I would like you to do it.” Jax thought the trip, just the two of them, would be good for his brother. “Please.”

“O-Okay.” The younger man agreed finally. “I, um, I need to get my things together before we go.”

Stiles set the spoon he was stirring oatmeal with down and trudged over to the Gemma, taking Nicolae into his own arms. Juice handed his spatula off to Tara and joined Stiles, following him out the back door.

“I hope you know what you’re doing, Jackson.” His wife’s disapproval over his tactics was clear in her tone.

“I do.” He sure as hell hoped he did anyway.

Seeing as they were returning to Beacon Hills the next day, Melissa expected everyone to begin packing as soon as they were done with breakfast. Once the meal was finished, however, not one person made a move to leave the table, all content to sit around and shoot the breeze.

“Everything needs to be loaded into the cars by tonight.” She wanted it all to be in order so they did not waste any time. “Since you are all just sitting here, I assume you’re packed and ready to go.”

“Actually, Kira and I will be staying here.” Ken informed them, patting his daughters arm. “The kids here need a real teacher. With Natalie going back to Beacon Hills, I need to stay.”

“Does Scott know?” Melissa gazed thoughtfully at the younger Yukimura.

“We talked before he and Derek left.” Kira tapped her fingers anxiously against the tabletop. “He understands.”

“I’m staying too.” Liam raised a hand apprehensively, as if afraid she might lash out at him in anger. “I wanna stay with Mason, and he’s made a home for himself here. I talked to Scott about it and he said it was okay.”

“What about your wolf?” Scott was Liam’s alpha, without him the beta would become an omega.
“You need a pack.”

“Scott and I agreed to meet up every full moon.” Liam told her, laying out the plan he had to keep his wolf from acting out. “With Kira, Malia, and Peter staying, I’ll have a pack.”

“Malia, you’re not coming with us?”

“I’ve got nothing for me in Beacon Hills. My family’s dead.” Beacon Hills held many bad memories for the coyote, from the death of her mother and her sister, to her father’s untimely demise. “I like it here.”

“Peter, you’re not going to stay with Derek and Cora?” Melissa was well aware that the elder Hale was not a favorite amongst the pack, but he willfully ignored that fact in an effort to remain close to his niece and nephew.

“It’s not a long drive from here to Beacon Hills, especially with the military clearing out the walkers.” Peter acknowledged. “I can visit whenever I want. Plus, the people here don’t treat me like the scum of the earth—”

“They don’t know you.” Allison commented sarcastically.

“My point exactly.” Peter sneered at the girl. “Stiles and I have a mutual respect for one another. I find him far more enjoyable company than the rest of you.”

“You’re being creepy again.” Cora admonished her uncle.

“Nevertheless, I’m staying.” The ‘and that’s final’ was left unsaid but clear in the wolf’s tone. “Ken and I spoke to Lyla Winston yesterday. She said we can keep this house if we would all like to stay together, and we agreed.”

“Okay.” It looked like they had it all figured out. “Well, anyone not going to Beacon Hills needs to have their belongings in the vehicles by the end of the day.”

Jax only began to regret bringing Stiles to Beacon Hills once they were actually in Beacon Hills. The kid seemed chock-full of nervous energy when they passed through the checkpoint, and it all started to boil over once Vernon led them into the former Sheriff’s office at the station. He was biting his nails and bouncing his knee up and down like he couldn’t keep still no matter how hard he tried.

“Relax.” Jax gripped Stiles wrist between his fingers, running his thumb over his pulse point, feeling it racing.

“I’m fine.” Stiles lied, eyes flickering around the room, looking for all the world like a caged animal about to be put down.

“All right.” Vernon smiled as he sat down on the other side of the desk. “I’ve got a few questions that I’m supposed to ask you.”

“Fire away.” Jax would be as truthful as he felt was necessary.

“How long has your town been open for survivors to find sanctuary?” The older man inquired, reading off a list on a sheet of paper.
“Couple of months.” He didn’t have an exact date.

“What is your current population?”

“Fifty-one.” Their population had dwindled since the fire and attack on Charming. “After the residents who have chosen to move on to other towns leave, it will be forty-one.”

“Why did you decide to let people in?”

“That was Stiles idea.” Jax flashed a prideful grin in his younger brother’s direction.

“I, uh, I thought people should have a place to go.” Stiles said, continuing to chew on his nails. “No big deal.”

“You’re from Beacon Hills.” Vernon turned his attention to the younger man. “Why did you leave?”

“The refugee center here wasn’t safe.” What other reason could there possibly be for people to leave?

“Can you elaborate on that?” Vernon pushed for a more lengthy explanation. “We try to gather as much information as we can to improve our conditions and to prevent repeating past mistakes.”

“The military personnel in charge began rounding up anyone with medical knowledge first and shipping them off to god knows where. They killed them if they refused to leave.” Stiles revealed, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. “They must have realized that was detrimental to their cause, because when they started gathering up those with military backgrounds they did things differently.”

“How so?”

“If someone refused, they would grab a family member, usually a spouse. They would put a gun to their head and threaten to kill them if the former soldier didn’t come with them. We thought they were bluffing the first time they did it, we found out quickly that they weren’t. If there was no spouse available, they would kill the nearest relative, even if it was a child.” Stiles shuddered at the memory. “My dad had been a Marine. He didn’t want to risk them hurting me and he wasn’t going to leave me in this world unprotected. We found a weakness in the fence and left in the middle of the night with another group of people.”

“Do you mind if I ask where you were headed when you left Beacon Hills?” Vernon questioned, jotting notes on the paper.

“North.”

“And how did you end up in Charming?”

“I started going south.” Stiles stated dumbly. “Can I go? I’d like to leave.”

“Go ahead.” Jax answered before their host could get another word in. “Don’t wander too far.”

“I won’t.”

“I’m sorry.” He apologized to Vernon once Stiles was gone. “This office has a lot of memories. It was his father’s.”

“Finstock mentioned that. I should have picked a better spot for the meeting.” Vernon ducked his
head apologetically, obviously ashamed for having put Stiles in the position to dredge up old feelings. “Do you have any questions for me?”

“How many of these bases are there?” Jax knew of the one he was currently in and the headquarters, but no one had said anything about others.

“We set up one in every state, except Hawaii and Alaska.” He nodded to the map pinned to the wall. “Most of the states already had towns open to anyone seeking refuge, like yours. In fact, you are one of three here in California. There are towns in San Joaquin and San Francisco.”

“What do you do about those towns?” That was the real questions. Did they leave them alone or dismantle them?

“We ask them to become part of what we are. Every other week they send a representative to let us know how things are going and to collect supplies, things like that. We share resources and send new arrivals to the town of their choosing.” If that were true, it was a good system, something Charming would be happy to join. “Tyne Patterson, a former DA, is San Joaquin’s rep, and Rafael McCall is San Francisco’s. As you know, Finstock is ours. We thought if your brother was willing, that he would be a good choice for your representative.”

“He would be.” Stiles had strong ties to both Charming and Beacon Hills. He could easily navigate through both towns. “I’ll have to ask him about it.”

“So you’ll join us?”

“That is something I will have to discuss with my people before I make any decisions.” He led them, sure, but in the end the choice belonged to all of them. “I’ll call a meeting tonight and get back to you with an answer.”

“Great.”

“Look, there are some things you need to know about my town before you decide you’d like to align with us.” He didn’t want to start this relationship based on lies or half truths. “Have you ever heard of the Sons of Anarchy?”

“I’m sure I have. Why?”

“Well, that’s who I am.”

Stiles wandered around the station for a while after leaving the office. He glanced over shoulders, watching people work, and received a few annoyed scowls for the effort. For some reason, he decided Finstock was the lesser of evils and went to stand beside him while he waited for his brother to finish up with the meeting.

“Something I can help you with, Bilinski?” Finstock did not look up from his log sheet to address him.

“What are you doing?” Stiles recognized a few names on the paper his former coach was writing on, but nothing else discernible.

“Updating our population data and inputting the registration forms for the new arrivals for our headquarters. They cross-check to see if any of our other bases have relatives or friends of the
people in our base, so we can put them back in touch.” Finstock explained in more detail than Stiles expected from the man. “You got anyone out there looking for you?”

“No.” Everyone he loved was either dead or resided in Charming. “But, um, a friend of mine had family in Queens, New York. Are there any bases near there?”

“Give me some names, I’ll call headquarters. They have a master list of everyone.” Finstock handed him a sheet of paper and a pen. “I’ll try to get that information before you and your brother leave this afternoon.”

“Thanks.”

The road to Port Angeles was bloody, just as it had been the first time they had driven it. The forest was crawling with walkers. The dirt path leading up to the cliff house was littered with bodies, both of the living and the dead.

“We need to make this quick.” Derek insisted as they hopped out of the truck, taking down two biters before he could even get the door closed.

“One of us digs and the other keeps watch.” Scott suggested, knowing one of them needed to be on the lookout for walkers or scavengers.

“Yeah.”

A pit of burnt wood sitting in an overgrowth of weeds was all that was left of the house. It was a striking sight, one that had Scott unconsciously visualizing Stiles beneath the rubble. It took him a moment to shake the weight of guilt and remorse it left behind.

“Hey,” Derek wrapped a large hand around Scott’s bicep. “It’s over there.”

Scott let his gaze wander to the gravesite. There was a layer of grass covering the lump of dirt, but the marker gave it away. The crooked cross, made of old plywood that had begun to rot, sat firmly in the ground, the initials JNS carved into it.

“You keep watch.” The other wolf instructed, pulling a shovel and tarp from the back of the truck. “I’ll dig.”

“This is…the right thing. Right?” It was a little late to start second-guessing their decision now, seeing as they were already there. “It’s not grave-robbing, right?”

“He deserves to be buried with his family, not up here by himself.” Derek reaffirmed their reason for traveling to Port Angeles. “We’re taking him home as respectfully as we can. There’s nothing wrong about that.”

“We’re giving everyone closure.” Once this was done, they could finally put the demons of Port Angeles behind them.

“Yes, we are.”

It was well after dark when Stiles finally made it home for the night, having had to stay late to
answer questions at the town meeting long after most had departed. The lights on in the living room let him know someone was still awake as he made his way through the house. He wasn’t surprised to find it was Juice who had yet to head off to bed.

The older man was leaning over the sink in the kitchen, scrubbing out baby bottles. Stiles came up behind him, curling his arms around his waist. Juice leaned into his touch, shivering when Stiles placed a gentle kiss behind his ear.

“How was your day?” He asked, resting his chin on Juice’s shoulder.

“Loud. The kid was cranky. I finally got him down an hour ago.” Juice murmured, nodding down the hall to the nursery. “How was yours?”

“It was okay.” It would have been downright tedious if he had not had the weight of Beacon Hills hanging over his head. “Jax wants me to go back up tomorrow to help settle things. Would you go with me? I mean, Jax is going too, along with everyone else relocating to Beacon Hills, but I want you to come.”

“I’ll come with you.” Juice assured him in a soothing voice, as if he could sense the anxiety thrumming through Stiles veins. “We’ll ask Mary to watch Nicolae.”

“Thanks.”

He nuzzled the older man’s neck, nibbling a piece of his skin between his teeth. Any other time, if might be a sexual gesture, this time, though, it was more of a nervous one. Juice must have known that, because he made no sexual advances in reciprocation.

“You gonna tell me what’s wrong? It’ll save us a restless night and moody morning if you just tell me now.” Juice cut through the bullshit to see what was on Stiles mind. “What is it?”

“I, um, I did something.” He admitted, taking a step back and allowing Juice to turn around so they could be face-to-face. “I know I overstepped a boundary doing it and I’m sorry.”

“Are you gonna tell me what it is or are you going to make me guess?”

“Finstock told me about a master list of survivors they had at their headquarters.” They had a similar list at the communications tower. “I gave him some names and he made a call.”

“What names?”

“Look, I know it helps you sleep at night to not know.” Blissful ignorance is what kept Juice from falling into grief over the potential loss of his family. “But I thought…if you knew that even one of them was still alive, that you could…find some peace.”

“My family. You asked about my family.” The briefest flicker of betrayal crossed over Juice’s features before a blank mask took its place. “You, um, you wouldn’t be telling me this unless one of them was alive.”

“I have a list, if you want it.” That list was currently burning a hole in his pocket. “I’m sorry if you’re upset. I did it in the moment and…I’m sorry if it’s not what you want.”

“Can I have the list, please?” Juice held out his hand expectantly.

“Uh, yeah.” Stiles removed the sheet of paper from his pocket and handed it over.
“Thanks.” Juice unfolded the paper slowly, eyes carefully scanning the list. “Oh.”

“Juice?” Stiles cupped a hand to the nape of the older man’s neck, feeling him tremble beneath his finger. “What is it?”

“My sister Marianna, my brother Ray and his wife Roxanne aren’t on here.” Juice cleared his throat around the lump of emotion built up there. “But, um, my sister Marisol, my baby brother Felix, and my m-mom are. It’s says they’re in Buffalo, New York.”

There was no proper response to that revelation. There was obvious relief in knowing that three of the Ortiz’s were still alive. Then there was the sadness and despair for the three that were either dead or missing. The only thing Stiles could think to do was pull the other man into a fierce hug.

“I’m sorry if you didn’t want to know.” He mumbled into the crook of Juice’s neck.

“It’s okay.” Juice relaxed into the embrace. “My mom’s alive.”

“Finstock said you could write to her. A team goes to headquarters once a month. Buffalo’s run team would pick it up and get it to her.” The satellite phones were for official use only and the radio’s range didn’t go quite that far as of yet. Letters were the easiest form of communication. “You should write to her. It might bring her some comfort to know you’re still alive.”

“I will. I’ll write to her.”

Jax had decided that those visiting Beacon Hills would ride the schools short bus, to save gas, while those moving would follow behind in a convoy of cars. Stiles was surprised to find how full the bus was when he and Juice boarded. Aside from Piney, who was driving, and Jax who had to go as Charming’s leader, there were also the Bishops, Opie, and Gemma in attendance. He could understand Opie coming as Jax’s second, but he had no idea why the Bishops or Gemma had come along.

Juice nudged him toward an available seat in the front when it became clear he wouldn’t find one for them himself. Juice slid in first, taking the window and leaving the aisle open for him. The aisle seat put him an arms-length away from Blythe, who was in the seat directly across from him.

He was tempted to ignore her completely, as he had since Piney had sat him down a week ago and given him her truth. It hadn’t meant much to him at the time, it felt like an explanation given too little too late. The more he thought on it, mulled it over in his mind, the more he understood it.

“I left my family too.” He admitted, startling the old woman. “Juice and our son, I left them, and my brother and nephews.”

It had only been for a few hours, sure, but his intention was to be gone for much longer. He was going to leave his family for the foreseeable future like she had. It made him no better than her, except for one difference.

“I came back.” Juice had come to retrieve him, but the fact remained the same. “I don’t ever plan on leaving them again.”

“I didn’t want to leave your father, my John.” Blythe claimed, and Stiles actually believed her. “I was going to find him, explain myself.”
“But you didn’t and you should have, because he needed you.” As much as he wanted to deny it, he knew it was true. “After Henry died, he was alone, left to figure out how to live on his own. When I was born, he could have used a parent to help him, to reassure him that he was doing everything right, that he didn’t have to be scared. When my mom got sick and when she died, he needed you.”

There were times in his life when he had overheard his father speaking to someone when he thought Stiles wasn’t listening. One time in particular came to mind, when Stiles had been in a car wreck. He had awoken in a hospital bed to hear his father speaking in low tones to Piney, ‘I wish my dad was here,’ his father had sobbed, ‘or even Mom. I just wish one of them was here to tell me what to do.’

“You had years to find him and you didn’t. That is something you are going to have to live with.” She had lived with it for over forty years already, Stiles would bet that she could live with it for the rest of her life. “He probably would have forgiven you, but I’m not him.”

“What does that mean?”

“Jamie and I are good. Neither of us were factors in your decision to stay away from Henry and my dad.” They were innocent bystanders in her choice. “But you and me? That’s complicated. I’m never going to forgive you for abandoning my dad. I’m never going to call you grandma. We’re not family. However, I will try to get to know you, because my dad would want me to. I can’t make any promises, though.”

“Thank you.” She smiled appreciatively, tears shining in her eyes. “For giving me a chance.”

“Yeah, well, thank my dad. All the good traits I got from him weren’t completely diluted by Mama Gemma.” He joked halfheartedly, earning a laugh from Juice and a thump to the back of the head from the woman herself, who was sitting in the seat behind him.

“You can’t help but get in a cheap shot, can you?” Jax leaned in from his place beside his mother to chuckle in Stiles ear.

“It’s like a knee-jerk reaction.” No, he couldn’t fucking help himself. “Sorry, Gem.”

“And here I thought we would be past the insults since we cuddled.” Gemma huffed mockingly.

“You cuddled with her?” Jax snorted in disbelief.

“She caught me in a moment of weakness.” Stiles declared, sinking down further in his seat.

“Keep telling yourself that.”

When Jax had heard of Scott and Derek’s plan to return to Port Angeles, he wasn’t sure what to think of it. Disturbing a gravesite was a little sick, but he understood the gesture. It was their way of righting a wrong.

Keeping it from Stiles was easier than he thought it would be. However, he assumed the jig would be up as soon as the younger man saw who was accompanying them to Beacon Hills. He was more than a little surprised to see the kid give the passengers a cursory glance as he was led to his seat.

It was late in the afternoon when they arrived in Beacon Hills, after a delayed start thanks to the buses faulty engine. Jax let Stiles help the town’s new residents get checked in with Finstock,
while he went to speak to Vernon at the sheriff’s station.

“Hey,” He greeted the older man with a handshake. “How’s it going?”

“Good. Busy.” Vernon motioned to the bustle of people coming in and out of the office. "And yourself?"

"I'm good."

“Have you spoken to your brother about being your representative?”

“I have.” Initially, Stiles was reluctant, but he eventually signed on with his new job placement. "He’ll do it.”

“I’m glad to hear that. I’ve heard nothing but good things about him from Finstock, Scott, and Derek.” The old man complimented his brother before his face pinched in a sour expression. “Of course, that woman who banged on our gate last week, Jarry, had some choice words about him as well.”

“Jarry is…” Jax had a few choice words of his own for Jarry, but he would keep them to himself for the time being. “She has never gotten along with my brother. She’s threatened by him and his authority in Charming.”

“She said he killed a man in cold blood.”

“He killed a man who had tortured him and stabbed me in the back.” A phantom wave of pain washed over him, making his back twinge. “Is that a problem? You know, I’ve been very open about my crew and the people in Charming. We’ve all done things. That’s not a secret. It’s a little late for you to be kicking up a fuss about it now.”

“It’s not a problem.” Vernon held up a hand to halt Jax’s onslaught of words. “I just wanted you to know what she said. I actually didn’t think she would be a good fit here, so I sent her to San Joaquin to join Tyne Patterson’s camp.”

“Good call.” Although he wasn’t sure if Patterson would appreciate it. “Have Scott and Derek returned from their run?”

“They have.” The older man folded his hands in front of himself on the desk. “They are at the old funeral home getting everything ready. The plot at the cemetery has already been prepared. You can head over whenever you like.”

“Thank you.”

Stiles wasn’t quite sure how Gemma had pulled it off, but she had somehow talked him into showing Blythe and Jamie around Beacon Hills. He half-assed the job, of course, making lackluster gestures to what was left of his old house, to the police station, the high school, and to the fairgrounds where his parents had their first date. He had no intention of taking them anywhere near the cemetery, until Jax radioed for them to meet him at the funeral home located on the same property.

He hadn’t been to the funeral home since his mother’s service. He was filled with dread and anxiousness as he entered the building now. He didn’t fail to notice that while he had arrived with
three others, he had gone into the building alone. The sudden abandonment did nothing to calm his nerves.

Finding Jax, Scott, and Derek standing in front of a closed casket had him taking an instinctual step back, until he was flush with the large door. His hands began to shake even as the men offered him consoling smiles and silently beckoned him over. His feet felt like lead weights when he finally found the strength to shuffle toward them.

“W-What’s going on?” He stuttered warily, eyes darting from the wolves and his brother to the casket and back again. “What is this?”

“Go ahead.” Jax urged Scott or Derek to speak. “You should tell him. It was your idea.”

“We, um, we went with the bases run team to Bremerton yesterday, and from there we drove to Port Angeles.” Scott said hesitantly, as if he was unsure of how Stiles would react. “We thought….We wanted to…”

“We thought your dad should be put to rest properly.” Derek finished for the alpha. “There was nothing left of my parents to bury, so I know how it must have felt for you to leave your dad in a strange place.”

“Y-You….?” He felt light headed at Derek’s admission, as the words registered in his mind. “My d-dad is in there?”

“Yes.” Scott nodded slowly. “We thought- I’m- If it’s not-“

“C-Can you go? I just….need a minute with…him.” He placed an unsteady hand on his father’s casket. “Please go.”

“Yeah. Sure.”

Jax didn’t leave with the wolves and Stiles was thankful for it. His brother’s presence brought him a sense of comfort as he stared at the coffin as if it were Pandora’s Box. He wasn’t sure what made him open it, the need to know his father was really in there, perhaps, the knowledge that it wasn’t a lie or a big ruse.

The smell of decomposition hit his nose first, he forced himself to ignore it, as well as the obvious decay of the body. He focused on the jacket his father still wore, the windbreaker that declared him a member of the Beacon Hills County Sheriff’s Department. In the interior breast pocket was a picture that held a permanent placement there since it was taken. It was a family photo, of Stiles and his parents smiling happily together at the beach, the last one taken before his mother’s health took a turn for the worse.

The picture, like his father’s service pistol and badge, were staple items in his dad’s day-to-day life. Stiles had left the pistol in his dad’s holster when he buried him, much like he had the photograph. The only things he had taken were his father’s badge and wedding ring.

He took the badge from his pocket then, holding it delicately in his hands. He reached into the casket, pinning the shield to his father’s jacket.

“There. That’s better.” He smoothed his fingers over it one last time, feeling warmth course through him at the rightness of it. “I’m keeping the ring.”

The ring was different, sacred in a way the badge was not. It was a link to both his parents, a token of their love for each other, given to his father by his mother. He could give the badge back to its
rightful owner, but he needed to hold on to one heirloom, and he knew his father would not fault him for it.

“Stiles,” Jax called to him softly. “We planned a service, that’s why we brought everyone. When it’s done, he’ll be buried with your mom. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” He understood perfectly as he closed the lid to the coffin, forever sealing his father inside.

“Are you ready for that?” That was the million-dollar question, wasn’t it? “Are you ready to open the doors, so the others can come in to say goodbye to him too?”

“I…” It stopped him short, the idea that there were others that needed to say goodbye, people who cared for his father and missed him. “Okay.”

“Come on. Sit down.”

He leaned heavily on his brother, not trusting himself to walk, as he was led to the nearest pew. Jax left him to open the doors but returned swiftly to his side. Gemma sat at Stiles other side, taking his hand in hers. Juice, Piney, and Opie were behind him, sitting quiet, stoic, offering their moral support. One by one, the pews were filled with those who cared for his father in one way or another.

Stiles didn’t know the priest who officiated the service. He didn’t see the first person who stepped up to speak kind words. Everything was muted and his vision had darkened around the edges. His heartbeat was deafeningly loud in his ears and his eyes could not be pulled from his father’s casket. To him, there was no one else in the room, it was just he and his father as it always had been.

Jax and a select few members of his party had agreed to remain in Beacon Hills overnight, to help the ones who would be staying settle in the morning. They had been given guest quarters in one of the empty houses. They were supposed to sleep, rest up for their journey the next day, and most of them were, except he and Stiles.

Jax could see his brother through the crack of the bedroom door. He was pacing the length of the living room. Every so often he would stop at the front window, gaze longingly out the glass plane as if he could find what he had lost just outside of it. He looked younger than he had in years, like a little boy who had everything precious ripped away from him.

Jax edged off the bed far enough to kick the door open further with his foot. It was an opening that Stiles could either take or ignore. Given his brother’s recent state, he wasn’t quite sure how it would play out.

The younger man had been so still at the funeral. As soon as the service started, he had been like a statue. He didn’t speak nor cry. He remained unemotional throughout the entire ordeal.

Now, though, the younger man stepped into the bedroom, closing the door behind him. He crawled into bed beside Jax, just as he would when he was a boy and suffered a nightmare. Jax draped his body protectively around his brother and waited.

It didn’t take long for the sobs to escape Stiles throat or the tears to soak the bed sheets. The tremors of grief racked his body and Jax held him tighter in fear that he might fall apart completely if he didn’t. Then again, falling apart was the whole point.
Stiles needed to feel the anger and sadness. He needed to mourn, to give in to the grief that he had held on to for so long. Once he did that, he could finally begin to heal.

“Let it out, buddy. I’ve got you.”

Stiles extracted himself from his brother’s hold in the early hours of the morning. He tiptoed out of the house, careful not to wake anyone from their slumber. He let the rising sun be his only companion as he made the short trek to the cemetery.

His mother’s grave sat prominently, bathed in a haze of light. Directly to her left was his little sister, a beautiful carved angel adorning her headstone. To his mother’s right sat his father, the disturbed dirt a sign of his recent burial.

It was an old memory the sight of the graves brought to the forefront of his mind. His mother’s grave had been freshly dug, her casket waiting to be lowered and covered in dirt. He hadn’t wanted to leave her, he hadn’t wanted her to be alone. It was only his father’s words that gave him the encouragement he needed to go, his firm assurances that she would never be alone and neither would he.

“It’s okay, Stiles, you still got me.” His dad squeezed his shoulder gently. “And you still have your mom, even if she isn’t here anymore. She is always going to be with you and so will I.”

“You promise?”

“Your mom and I love you more than anything in this world.” His father caressed his fingers through his hair. “That love doesn’t die. It stays with you forever. Even if we go away, if we die, you will always have that love. Nothing and no one, not even death, can take that away.”

“Ms. Laurel.” Scott’s familiar voice pulled him from his memory and to the alpha who had appeared beside him at some point. “She was the florist in town, remember? She moved back and started planting again. She gave us the flowers for your mom’s grave.”

“Oh.” Honestly, he hadn’t even noticed the bouquet sitting against her headstone. “My mom hated flowers.”

“She did?” Scott furrowed his brows in confusion. “But you and your dad would always bring her flowers on her birthday and stuff.”

“When we found out the dementia was incurable, Mom started talking about what we would do when she was gone.” She wanted them to be prepared, to be able to care for themselves when she wasn’t around to do it anymore. She wanted them to be able to move on. “She told Dad that if he ever left flowers on her grave, especially pink ones, ‘cause she hated pink, then she would haunt his ass. He made her promise that she would.”

“That’s sweet.” Scott grinned accordingly, happy to be let in on a Stilinski family secret. “You dad, he’s um, he’s gonna have a real headstone. That wooden thing is just temporary.”

“Thank you, for all of it.” There was no way Stiles could ever express how grateful he was to Scott and Derek for what they had done. “One of my biggest regrets was not being able to bring him home. You did that. Thank you.”

“I loved him too.” The alpha whispered, a solitary tear streaming down his face. “We weren’t sure
whether to bring him here or to Charming, I know he had family there.”

“This is the right place. He would have wanted to be with my mom and sister.” His grandfather was buried beside his parents in Charming. His father’s place was beside the woman he loved and his only daughter. “This is right.”

“Good.”

“You know, ever since it happened, since he died, I’ve woken up with his voice in my head, telling me to get up. Sometimes I would make it through the day just so I could go to sleep and hear his voice again the next day.” It had felt almost like a curse the first time he had heard it, but soon turned into his greatest blessing, something he yearned to hear every morning. “I woke up this morning and it wasn’t there, he wasn’t there.”

“You got up anyway.”

“I did.”

“Maybe it’s a sign that you should stop living because of a promise you made to your dad.” Scott mused thoughtfully. “Maybe it’s time to start living for yourself.”

“Maybe you’re right.”

Chapter End Notes

The End.

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