Reaper’s Harvest (The Unholy Book Of Ruth)

by OnlyOneWoman

Summary

This is part two of The Human Trap series, starting when Juice is released from hospital. If you've not read "Fare thee well..." and you'd like to start on this, you should read the first part because otherwise it's not gonna make much sense.
Be aware: this is NOT canon and my style includes playing a lot with the characters and exploring sides that aren't shown in canon. Basically, I love to make hard-ass men explore their softer sides. Marked explicit for later chapters.

Note: I had to check how old Chibs is supposed to be, because I just took Flanagan's age and used that, so to say. Apparently, Chibs is only 36 in season 2, meaning he's probably around 41 in season 7 and since my story takes place about 3 years later, that lands on 44. Juice would be around 36, so that makes their age difference a lot smaller than I first thought.

So, just to be clear: Chibs 44, Juice 36.

Kisses and hugs to all of you lovely people commenting and supporting my first jump into this fandom. Let's follow the reaper!
Chapter 1

But Ruth replied, “Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried.”

Ruth 1:16-17

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“This is it. I have just cleaned it.”
“It’s very nice, ma’am.”

Too nice for someone like him. The strained smile says everything this Mrs. Ellis is too polite to put into words. Clearly, she’s had a good old-fashioned upbringing and is very much aware that Juice hasn’t. Invited by the priest or not, he’s an intruder. The thin old woman walks to the bed and removes the white, crotchet coverlet, folding it neatly under her arm.

“I didn’t have time to fill the linen cupboard on such short notice, but I’ll be up soon with some sheets.”
“Thank you, ma’am.”
“Breakfast is served six thirty, lunch one o’clock and dinner seven thirty. Please wash up before you make the bed and put your things in the closet.”
“Uhm.. Yeah, sure… ma’am.”

She turns around and leaves, shutting the door on half and Juice tries to breathe again. He almost sits on the bed, before realising how the priest’s housekeeper would react to that and instead he slumps down on the old wooden chair without padding.

It is a nice room. Dark and old-fashioned with heavy drapes and not enough light from the window or the small lamps. One on the desk, one just above the sink and a third over the narrow bed. It’s old-fashioned as hell and, of course, there’s a Bible laying on the small, lace cloth covered bedstand. It’s like being moved to… well, far fucking back in time. Juice never really stayed awake during history lessons.

He puts his two bags on the floor. One of them is new and contains things other people insisted on buying while he was still in hospital. After accepting the priest’s offer, Juice apparently went from a problem to decide what to do with, to a problem people had some kind of solution to. Except for Chibs. He just remained close and as Juice opens the wardrobe and unexpectedly sees himself in the large mirror inside one of the doors, he has to bite his lip to not cry.

It’s a fucking disaster staring back at him. A miserable bag of bones in new clothes that only makes the thing inside of them look more ragged and hollow. The wild, stupid thought that he doesn’t need the reaper on his back or arm anymore, because he’s practically looking like him anyway, almost makes him laugh. He arranges his few items rigorously, it helps doing something with his hands.

Also, he doesn’t expect the housekeeper not to snoop and a small part of him would like to see her face when she opens it, prepared for a mess.

He closes the door and starts putting his toileteries in the cupboard over the sink. There’s only a small toilet outside the room that he’ll share with other guests that might pay the padres an informal visit
and the shower is upstairs, next to Mrs. Ellis’ room. Beggers can’t be choosers and Juice wouldn’t dream of voicing the slightest indication of discontent now that this priest so kindly has offered him a place, but the idea of that woman walking in on him… She seems like the kind of woman who has keys to every door and doesn’t hesitate to use them.

Juice looks through the bag for his meds and after a confused moment, he remembers that the padre has them. Apparently, Juice isn’t trusted to handle his own meds and he’s slightly offended by that until he recalls that he didn’t handle them last time.

He’s finally done unpacking. There’s still some items left in the backpack. An old notebook, his sunglasses and one of Dyna’s stupid little cat toys. It’s a little ball made from one of Juice’s socks filled with newsprint and some catnip, kept together with a string. Some little girl has his cat now, giving her proper cat toys and a lot more space to run around at. Juice has a place to stay, whole clothes and his medical bills have been paid. He’s just no longer a member, not shunned completely and he knows, knows with all his being how fucking grateful he should be for the mercy he’s been shown. From the club, the society, the priest and his housekeeper.

Grateful, for the numbness no longer reigning supreme. Only thing is, where the numbness used to lay, the old fear starts making itself comfortable again. The Bible on the nightstand wont change that. Juice puts a hand in his pocket and the breathing that had started to speed again, slows down as he twines the smooth, green beads from Chib’s rosary around his fingers.
Chapter 2

He dreamed again. Took a nap in the dorm and woke up from a bad fucking nightmare and, which is a terror on its own, Chucky storming in on him, prepared to attack whatever it was having the pres scream, only to be greeted with a quite hard pillow in the face. Sure, Chibs appologies the minute he’d come to his senses and Chucky, as always, accepted that but it’s still fucking undignified behavior.

The cup of coffee Chucky ran out to get, probably to avoid another hard pillow, tastes far better than Chibs deserves right now and so does the croissant that will lay to rest on his bulky belly. It’s been shrinking a bit the last year but it’s still very much alive and thriving and Chibs hasn’t got the time or a mirror big enough to care. The sweet and bitter taste of the pastry mixed with black coffee isn’t a bad way of waking up from an afternoon nap. *Afternoon nap*… He’s getting fucking old.

As he munches through half of the pastry, Chibs looks at his phone. Nothing. No missed calls or unread texts, which is good. He’s had one hell of a busy week, running like an idiot between Teller-Morrow, Tig’s and Venus’ house and the hospital. Oh, and the priest. Chibs is a suspicious nature but since Juice had accepted his offer, it would’ve been wrong and rude to object. Still, it doesn’t feel good that the lad is on his own again. Technically he has company, but is it good? The priest seems decent enough – and again, who is Chibs to raise concerns, since he’s really one of the reasons Juice ended up like this in the first place – but that doesn’t mean Juice will feel comfortable.

Chibs shakes his head. Fucking hell, his thoughts remind him of how he used to fuss with Fiona during third trimester, like she was mad of glass. It’s a wonder she didn’t kill him, the bone hard lass she was, but just snapping at him that he was a bloody army medic and if he didn’t waver from bellies gaping open from grenade splinters, he shouldn’t fucking start wailing from this but just fucking hold his wife during fucking contractions. Fiona has her faults, but emotional weakness sure as hell ain’t one of them. If she knew Chibs was feeling anxious about a rat not feeling good and safe, she’d probably punch him.

He sits down by the desk, sighing at the stack of papers he needs to go through. Chucky has organized and even labeled them with post-it notes, bless that numpty. Practical, but still depressing. Chibs loved and appreciated Gemma and she knew that, but it’s not until she died, that it’s clear just how much paperwork she ploughed through every month. These days, Chibs seems to spend more time by the desk than on his bike or in the garage and that’s gotta change. Chucky is good and reliable, weird fucker as he is, but they need more back-up, more eyes and hands, not to mention minds to fill in whenever some shit is happening and Chibs can’t be there. T.O. is the obvious choice when it comes to responsibility, but the man has absolutely no experience with handling business’ books and Tig just gets too bored.

Showing up by the priest’s house unannounced probably isn’t a good idea, or is it? Chibs knows he’s being fucking irrational and unlike Chucky, he’s not very keen on accepting it. He knows it’s better for Juice, staying with someone outside the club, who has a home with more furniture than a small bed and old, worn down couch. Someone with a housekeeper that will cook for and keep an extra eye on him until he’s strong enough to start looking for a job.

It’s not basic stuff like food, warmth or roof over the head that Chibs worries about, though. The priest seems to know enough about mental illness to keep calm and handling Juic’e’s meds, but there are a lot of things the priest doesn’t – and shouldn’t – know of. Also, how much of a protection against the one – or those – who destroyed Juic’e’s motel room can a priest and his housekeeper be if
the bastard decides to snoop around a bit more? The thought that it’s not only possible, but very likely that the one responsible for trashing the place, knows where Juice stays now, is giving Chibs chills down his spine. Fact is, the only place where Juice would be safe now, is a locked psychiatric ward or protected custody. Chibs now regrets not arguing more to escort Juice to the priest. Or maybe it’s just his own recently appearing tendency to worry obsessively about every single detail.

He sticks a hand in his pocket out of old habit, but doesn’t find what he’s searching for. It’s a tic more than anything, to shove down his hand and thumb on the beads when he gets worried, but Juice has the rosary and his left pocket is empty.

Juice staying with the priest is good, reasonable and very generous. Father Mark seems to be both decent and intelligent, kind and all, but how something seems and how it really is, are two different things. Even at his best, Juice was never good at seeing when he was manipulated, at least Chibs has finally realised that, and the lad is far from his best now. He needs someone to keep an eye on him, whom he doesn’t have to put up a brave face in front of, or will use him. He also needs that stupid cat and Chibs needs to regain his own balance again. Because who ever it was destroying Juice’s motel room and scaring off the cat, he – Chibs honestly doesn’t think it’s a woman – might just as well only have started.

A green smiley… *Greenlight… Happy…* Overlooking the most obvious answers has gotten lots of otherwise damn intelligent people killed, because they were too smart to think out a fucking stupid reason. But accusing a brother of harming an ex-communicated rat that just has been pardoned from Mr. Mayhem and allowed personal connection with a member, but in no way is welcome back in the club? That’s just pissing on the patch and the green smiley might just as well be a coincidence.

Sounds from the garage pulls him out of his thoughts and he swallows the last coffee in an almost angry sweep. No use just sitting here and dwell, better get some work done. The nightmare is effectively boxed up in a safe space of his brain, where Juice is hanging in that chain, cold and limp with the stupid, nervous smile plastered on his face.
Chapter 3

The dining room looks like nothing he’s seen before. Which says a lot more about how few old – and old-fashined – homes Juice has been inside, than anything else. First of all: it really is a fucking dining room, like made only for eating and not only dinner. Eating dinner in the kitchen, arapantly, isn’t good enough for a priest and the table is set with old dishes and hard-pressed linen napkins. Two plates, four chairs and a grandfather clock with a rather uncomfortable sound – Juice knows what it is thanks to Gemma – and the few lamps although with warm light, are too small to light up the dark panels.

“What are you doing in here?”

Juice turns around so quickly he almost bumps into the table edge and Mrs. Ellis looks like she’d just caught him red handed stealing the table silver.

“I... I was just looking, ma’m. Haven’t really… been into a dining room like this before.”

“There’s a first time for everything. It’s handcrafted linen so I’d appreciate if you don’t touch it.”

She puts down a vase of flowers on the table and checks the napkins again, as if she’s afraid Juice might have stained them. Juice has no problems with being seen as a criminal, a street rat and a general low life, because that’s what he is, but he’s not a colony of bacteria. He swallows hard.

“Uhm… Mrs. Ellis? Ma’m?”

“Yes?”

“I uhm… I’m… I’m not dirty.”

God, how stupid… The woman looks at him over her glasses and Juice feels how his ears turn red.

“What I meant is that… I’m a bit obsessed with cleaning. I mean… I… It’s not very likely I’d walk around indoors with messy hands to begin with and I’d never touch things inside without washing up first.”

“Well, that’s a relief. If you’re done ogling, maybe you’d be so kind as to come with me to the kitchen?”

Juice just nods, feeling like a little kid being scolded at in advance for something every decent person simply knows the likes of him will do at one point or another. He doesn’t belong in a dining room, scrubbed hands or not, and he follows the housekeeper to the kitchen that looks more comfy now without all the traces of moving. It’s still quite dark, though, but the food cooking on the stove smells delicious.

The kitchen table is also set with the same kind of plates and glasses like in the dining room, but only one has a linen napkin. The other has one of paper, folded to a triangle on the plate. It’s subtle for the untrained eye and screaming loud to Juice. There’s a ranking in this house where the padres eat in the dining room, the staff in the kitchen and the charity cases who will soil down the fine linen, has a disposable napkin. Juice understands it, it makes sense, but still... It’s always easier being nothing when you’re not surrounded with people who are something and every reminder hurts. It shouldn’t, but since when did Juice’s feelings care about how things should or shouldn’t feel?

“Can… can I help with anything, ma’m?”

“Thank you, but I think I have the mash under control.”
How dare you offering help to me!? I’ve been a housekeeper here since before you were born, you little scumbag!

No, she doesn’t say that, but it’s what she means. Eating with her in here might actually be far worse than with the high and mighty padres in the gloomy dining room. At least they – well, one of them – chose to take Juice in. It’s very clear that Mrs. Ellis wasn’t asked.

Juice wonders if she understands that the only reason he was able to even enter this house without turning around and run, is because of those white little miracles he’s been swallowing obediently from the nurse’s hands and, from this evening on, from padre Mark’s. The numbness once saving him from going completely crazy, is no longer there, leaving Juice in more pain and fear again, even with the meds.

He sits down on the chair he presumes is his and the moment his bony ass feels the wooden seat and the woman doesn’t say anything, he knows he did something right. The disposable napkin marks his spot and suddenly, Juice feels like he just did a long walk in the woods again. He’s knackered and the world is a little unsteady, the kitchen with it’s lack of colors that would make Gemma sneer and give Venus a seizure spins around his head and he has to close his eyes to regain balance on the hard surface.

Juice misses that kitchen, misses Venus for some reason and he misses Chibs so much it, stupid as it is, feels like the man has turned his back on him again, even if it was Juice who accepted the priest’s offer. It seemed like the right option, the most reasonable one even though it’s too good for someone like Juice. Nothing about this should surprise him, but the time at the hospital with Chibs as a daily comfort by his side, seems like the only good thing left once again taken away from him, and Juice would rather eat the man’s cold tins of baked beans and sleep on his old couch than being served the same food as a parish's valued priests, but on a charity case’s and street rats separated spot.
Juice hasn’t answered and Chibs can’t leave the meeting at Venus’ elegant escort service *Aphrodite*, showing how nervous he is. Not that he isn’t a pro at keeping calm, but it’s unnerving. One of Samcro’s business partners is present and since it takes time to go legal without pissing off the wrong people off or become straight out poor and miserable, it’s a way more delicate balance than when they dealt with guns or even drugs. Smuggling is still their main income apart from the store front mechanic shop and jewelery and pirate copies of designers clothes may be far less risky but it takes time to find the right customers and frankly, it’s just not really their thing.

Mr. Henri doesn’t exactly look like a fashion oracle in his ill-fitting suite – even Chibs who couldn’t care less about these things can see that – and he has a way of looking at Venus’ youngest customers that Chibs doesn’t like at all. Tig, however, seems perfectly comfortable and that’s not a surprise. He’s always been far better at hiding utter disgust than Chibs. By the way Mr. Henri is grabbing and eyeing those in the staff that appear younger than they are is a bit sickening. To each their own, Chibs isn’tcondemning what adult people do of their own free will and certainly isn’t one to care about age gaps as long as it’s legal, but it’s something with Mr. Henri’s eyes that creeps Chibs out.

One of the girls has got Bambi eyes and reminds Chibs of Juice before things turned to shit. Mr. Henri introduces her as Rosie, as if it’s his establishment, and she gives a shy smile that could be a part of her performance, or genuine. It’s actually hard to tell, which means she’s neither new enough to openly show insecurity, or old enough in the job to have developed the hard, unsentimental look of an experienced street girl. *Aphrodite* is definitely not the place to go for a kiddie fucker, or even the kind of person who only fantasize about it and uses adult hookers to perform their sickening wishes, and when Mr. Henri makes a comment about Rosie’s pert tits, Chibs has to nail Tig with his gaze to stop him from saying something.

“My customers are the kind of ladies that only want the best copies. They want to able to go downtown looking like the women they can’t afford to be.”

Mr. Henri laughs at what apparently is his idea of a joke and tickles Rosie, who plays her role and giggles like a little girl.

“I only do business with people of good reputation, Mr. Telford, and Samcro has cleaned up since Jax Teller’s time, but I have a brand to protect, partners to care for and the MC has… well, had some heat.”

“It’s been three years since Jax Teller died, Mr. Henri, an’ Morrow was dead long before tha’. T’is not the same anymore.”

“No, you even allow niggers in these days. Really progressive, I must say. Who knows, maybe you’ll start patch in queers as well.”

He wants to provoke, is used to make people loose their calm and show their weaknesses, but Mr. Henri hasn’t met the pres or VP of Samcro before and the joyless laughter is only met with neutral faces and silence. Tig even looks at his watch and Chibs folds his hands together on the table.

“Well, Mr. Henri, the times are a changin’. We can even read now.”

The pathetic man that unfortunately is the key to a lot of fucking money for a lot less risks, laughs again, louder and it’s supposed to be hearty but only comes out as annoying.
“Have nothing against some fun on the side, Mr. Telford. This establishment sure has some fine looking twinks too…”

It’s probably just Chibs being old-fashioned, thinking that twink actually sounds far more creepy than whore ever did. This sad pile of shite isn’t the least concerned about what Samcro could do to him and his business, and why should he? Even Samcro’s illegal business are dealt with so peacefully now, some jokes on the street have been about whether Samcro should change their patch from the Reaper to a peace and love mark.

Jax had no idea how much hard work it would take to go legal and considering how he dealt with obstacles, Chibs is fairly certain Jax would never have gained the patience to follow through in the end. He loved the heat too much, because with everyone else feeling the chaos creeping too close, Jax would rise as the landmark, the calm leader, the signpost. Always showing that face of deep concern and eyes brimming of passion. It took far too long for Chibs to realise the emptiness and enormous ego hiding beneath that blue gaze and far too much damage to fix – or unfixable. And didn’t Jax pimp Juice out to the nazi as easily as this pile of trash would these girls and boys if they were his? Chibs forces a smile.

“Always prefered girls with some more years on’em, Mr. Henri. Venus is very strict with legal age.”

No emphasis on girls but his tone is equivalent to Happy’s and the ill-dressed, sloppy little man actually hesitates and lights one of his cheap cigarrs. The only think more pathetic than black hood rats with bling, is white trash with bling. Chibs doesn’t know why it annoys him, but it never ceases to amaze him how much despise he’s capable of wasting on men who are completely oblivious of how much their obvious lack of taste and style shines through their cheap armour. It reminds Chibs of the women in his childhood neighbourhood, dressing up in big fake gold earrings and high heels with fake diamonds, thinking they looked fancy, when it only took a trip to the better streets of Glasgow to realise how much of poor trash they were. Chibs’ maw never cared about bling.

“You have some well-ridden meat too, I presume. Maybe you could show me around?”

The laugh again and this time Tig manages to go along. It’s fake as hell, but this creepy scumbag doesn’t notice and Tig sighs.

“Alas, we don’t have much time for that today, Mr. Henri.”

“Aye, we should get down to business.”

It’s a little rude, but this man has to know how Samcro do their business these days and finally, after seemingly endless discussions where Chibs has a hard time not showing how impatient he feels. He wouldn’t even admit it to himself how much of the stress throbbing through him is about Juice. How he can’t help but remembering that one time in Stockton when the kid would act as a bait, even if it was never supposed to go too far, and Jax acted like it was nothing, even after Juice ended up stabbed.

Chibs sits through the meeting with only half his mind present – thank God Tig is there too – and they agree on another meeting, seeing this as a first, careful probing before presenting any propositions to the table. When the scumbag finally leaves, Venus is following him out and elegantly blocks him from getting too close to one of her boys without even making it look like blocking. Chibs just throws a look at Tig, who grits his teeth.

“I swear I’ll never beat hookers again.”

”Ye never did that.”
"No, but you don’t know that."

Chibs just shakes his head, hauling up his phone again and there’s still no missed calls or texts. He quickly puts it back in his pocket.

“I’m leaving for the night.”
“This early? Aren’t you gonna… oh.”

Tig stops himself and just nods.

"Go, boss. I don’t know where you’re heading."
"Thanks, brother."
"Just go. Give the little idiot a kiss from me."

Chibs realises he has his grim face on because his VP just puts his hands up.

“I was joking, you fucking mama bear.”
“Fuck off, Tig.”
”Love you too, brother.”
Chapter 5

"There you are."

Juice turns from facing the window he’s been staring at to have something to glue his gaze to and sees padre Mark in the kitchen door. Friendly blue eyes, a little smile. Mrs. Ellis curtsies.

“Good evening, Father. Dinner will be ready soon.”
“Thank you, Mrs. Ellis, it smells lovely.”

The housekeeper almost blushes, apparently serving these priests is her idea of the most important job in the world.

“Have you made yourself at home, Juice?”
“Yeah. Yes, padre. Thank you, it’s… really nice.”
“It’s an old house, but beautiful. Mrs. Ellis worked hard to get it in shape again.”

Little compliments, a smile or two. If Juice had still been able to form his old, cheeky grin, he’d had a hard time stopping it from showing now, because it’s so obvious how the priest is aware of how the older woman sees his white collar. There probably aren’t many left of the old-school ladies who actually thrive in this kind of job. Mrs. Ellis might be old, but she’s not ancient, probably only a few years older than Gemma was. Praise from a priest is her idea of the ultimate acknowledgement.

“Mrs. Ellis, I think there’s been a misunderstand with the settings.”
“Oh?”

The lady puts a cap on one of the pots and the priest gives one of his warm smiles again.

“I know you prefer to eat in the kitchen, ma’m, but this evening, maybe you’d like to eat with us in the dining room. Since we have a new guest living with us and all.”

_Guest._ It’s a very mild order, formed like a suggestion, but still an order and Juice wants to escape, but is frozen on his chair, trying to pretend he can’t hear what the man actually says. The priest is good at this, he thinks, to give a reprimand without making it sound like one. He doesn’t have to mention Juice’s name or the plates on the kitchen table.

Mrs. Ellis looks a little flushed and curtsies again. It’s very clear she’s not comfortable at all with that idea.

“Of course, Father.”
“Excellent! Is that rhubarb pie I smell?”
“Yes, Father.”
“You’re a treasure, Mrs. Ellis.”

He turns to Juice.

“Mrs. Ellis here is a danger to us all, because if she continues cooking like she’s done since I moved in, we’ll all end up in need of tents for clothes.”
“Oh, stop the nonsense, Father. And I’m to call on Father Timothy now.”
That’s the get out of my kitchen phrase and when Juice hesitates, padre Mark nods at him to come along. Juice swallows.

“Should… should I take the plates out, ma’m?”
“Yes, thank you, that would be nice.”

Her voice is still a bit sharp, but much less now with the priest present and Juice takes the china, cutlery and napkins from the table, walking through the door padre Mark holds up for him. Juice can’t make himself look at him, or the housekeeper, and just focuses on getting from point A to B as quick and carefully as possible, to avoid breaking something.

When they enter the dining room, at first it looks like padre Mark is about to say something, but the other priest is already there and fucking hell, he looks *old*. Juice puts the plates on the fine linen and swallows hard. Padre Mark just smiles.

“Father Timothy, this is Juan Carlos from the shop that I told you about.”

He almost screams it, the older priest has a hearing device and looks at Juice with thin, brown eyes, crooking a finger in an inviting gesture. Juice walks up to him.

“Uhm, hello, padre. Father.”

Why the hell is is so impossible for him to stop using padre and madre when he doesn’t even speak Spanish otherwise? The old man reaches his hand out, skin thin like paper and cold fingers.

“Welcome, Juan Carlos.”

He actually squeezes his hand a little and padre Mark leans down to his collegue’s ear.

“People mostly call him Juice, Father Timothy.”
“Jule?”
“No, *Juice*! Like in orange juice.”
“Juice?”
“Yes, that’s right. Juice Ortiz.”
“You’re Spanish?”
“Puerto Rican, *padre*. Sorry, Father.”
“Same word, different language. Have a seat, son. I hope Mrs. Ellis hasn’t scared you too much yet?”
“Uhm… No, *padre*."

Padre Timothy chuckles and to Juice’s surprise, he pats his arm.

“Her bark is worse than her bite, son. And her food makes up for both.”
Chapter 6

His heart almost skips a beat. The spot he’s chosen isn’t visible from any window unless you use binoculars, especially not in the dark. Apart from the Lord’s eye and whatever birds and beast passing by, Chibs is more or less invisible and that’s good. Really good. Taking the car – he hates the car – and leaving it on the supermarket parking lot was good too. The sound of his costumed Dyna would’ve been like shouting out his arrival and no fucking hell he’d leave her that far away.

Sneaking and spying, obviously doesn’t feel wrong for Chibs. Why would it? It’s more than a tool to commit crimes, it’s a way of surviving. He learned very early on when it was better to hide than fight. Ailean Telford had been a grim scumbag halfway down the bottle, especially after a hard day’s work, and Moira Telford, bless her soul, used to grab Filip and run upstairs, locking themselves in the bedroom and shove the large armchair she’d inherited from her grandma for the door. If they made it that far, Ailean could only stand outside and yell, beat the thick door with his iron fists and call them both names.

Once the yelling had stopped, it would usually take at least half an hour or more before it was safe to come out and in the meantime, Moira would sit with her tiny Filip in the bed and tell him stories. Sometimes she even had a little hidden cone with Gibb’s Soor Plooms, saved in her old dresser for what she called da’s bad days. Sneaking, hiding and spying was Moira Telford’s specialties, even if Chibs highly doubts her only son’s use of those skills would grant her blessing. Sometimes he’s grateful she died before he joined the True IRA.

The skill of spying, although, is one Chibs developed thanks to her and moving like a cat in the shadows outside the priests’ home, comes as natural to him as tip-toeing over the cracking floorboards in his childhood home in Glasgow once did. What’s different is the relief.

Juice is sitting by a large dinner table with the two resident clerks and an old woman. It’s old-fashioned and the lad is picking at his plate, but in a way that’s not so obvious. He takes small mouthfuls, pushes the carrots and peas around and forces himself to smile. The priests are talking, not only with each other but with Juice as well and Chibs’ pocket sized binaculars show him all he needs right now to calm down a worry of a content he wasn’t aware of until now.

Chibs lowers the binaculars and lets out a deep sigh. Jesus Christ, what’s happened to him? Is he out of his mind completely, or what? Spying like some psycho mother hen on a thirtysix years old man because he doesn’t trust him to be safe with a couple of clerks and an old housekeeper? It’s beyond pathetic, but doesn’t wipe out the feeling of relief – or distance.

The last time Juice sat at a dinner table like this, must be years ago. Chibs can’t recall the last family meal they had together with Juice present at Gemma’s place, when times were still good and the cracks in the Morrow-Teller facade still were filled and covered and no one knew Clay had sent John to his death with Gemma’s blessing. In hindsight, it’s difficult to leave those happy memories unstained from the truth. To Juice, that dinner table was everything his family’s meals never were and Chibs, the softie Fiona accused him of being, loved it too, because the club was family and the family you choose is everything. Everyone around that table had earned his or her place there. There was no tyrannic drunk coming home and demanding to be served like a king simply because he was the biggest and meanest.

Ailean Telford or Brian Parks. Juice hasn’t talked much of his stepfather but Chibs knew early on that family wasn’t a subject the young prospect wanted to bring up. He understood there was no
happy memories connected to Juice’s stepfather and since Chibs preferred to keep his own da well-hidden and unmentioned, he never pressed the issue. After all, they’d both chosen Samcro and that’s what mattered, not their bloodlines. None of them had ever been sitting in a dining room before Gemma’s, that’s for sure. Juice must feel like a complete alien in there, but it’s a nice gesture, inviting the ex-con and former gang member, to sit with the high and mighty.

The priests and the housekeeper may not see it, but even from this distance, Chibs can read Juice’s face and bodylanguage almost like in the old days. He’s struggling to sit straight and calm, it takes a long time for him to eat and swallow. There’s hesitation in every move, every glance and every painfully forced little smile. It’s a safe place, sort of, and comfortable as well. Not a lonely, impersonal motel room with thin walls, cold light and cheapest possible furniture. And yet, Juice still looks as lonely as ever.
Not finishing his meal is probably the very essence of rudeness, but Juice has a very small stomach these days and he folds his knife and fork over his two thirds finished plate, looking apologetic at the housekeeper.

“I’m sorry, ma’m, but I really can’t finish it all. My… my stomach is still a bit… small. It was really, really nice.”

Proper ass kissing, maybe, but it’s still true. She may hate having Juice at the dinner table, but she’s still a damn good cook and Juice truly wishes he could finish his plate. He’s not had meatloaf and mash for a long time and not even Gemma’s sauce is close to this woman’s. Mrs. Ellis graciously smiles at him, a bit stiff but she appreciates the praise.

“Thank you. I’m glad you enjoyed it, Mr. Ortiz.”

It would’ve been better if he’d finished it, but she won’t say that aloud. It’s rude too, after all, and the small wink from padre Mark tells him it’s alright. Padre Timothy – being allowed to call him that has very easily made the word father slip away again – wipes his mouth with the linen napkin.

“I heard you’re a mechanic, Juice!”

His voice is too loud, but it doesn’t make Juice startle as much, knowing it’s because of hear loss and he nods.

“Yes, padre.”
“What?”
“Uhm… Yes, padre! I am!”

Good God, it feels horrible to raise his voice like this. Juice’s face is heating and padre Mark turns to his colleague.

“You have to turn up your hearing device, father Timothy!”
“Oh…”

The older priest takes it off, fiddles with it until it makes a little shrieky sound and puts it back. Padre Mark looks at him.

“Better now?”
“Oh yes. The bloody thing… It stops working and I’m so used to it I barely notice it anymore… How long have you been a mechanic, Juice?”
“About fifteen years or so.”

It’s a little more than that, to be honest, but Juice doesn’t really feel like putting his school drop-out on display in case this half-deaf oldie is good with math and too curious for his own good.

“You like it?”
“Yeah, sure. It’s… good. Not been working with it for some time though.”

Because he’s been in jail and no mechanic shop in the area would be stupid or desperate enough to
hire an ex-communicated Son. Juice’s ink wasn’t cut, blacked or burnt out and you’ll have to look very
close to see traces of the sign the Aryan Brotherhood’s ink artist bleached out under Tully’s
watchful eye, but that doesn’t mean people don’t recognize his face. Removing the ink instead of
blackening it out because Tully didn’t want his toy smeared and it could’ve been a good gesture, not
destroying Juice’s skin, but it felt like having his identity not only removed but erased completely.
History, especially local, isn’t as easily hidden.

Working with bikes or even cars again would only feel like a pathetic attempt to regain a part of
himself he lost years ago. Padre Timothy keeps asking questions, but doesn’t try to dig too deep,
staying with the safe things concerning different car brands, polite questions about bikes and tells
about the time when he tried to ride one himself, but failed miserably and decided that good old
Fords were his kind of vehicle after all.

It’s still difficult, Juice is still tense and his head and back hurt from the strain of being in a new social
situation, especially as unfamiliar as this, but it keeps the thoughts of his own pathetic being away.
His own mind gets so loud when he’s alone even if the meds help, and being treated as a guest is of
course way better than sitting alone in the kitchen, but it still feels so wrong. He’s a rat, a coward and
a con. He’s a thief, gun and drug smuggler, liar, traitor and murderer. He’s tried to commit suicide,
has been a prison bitch, he’s been raped and beaten and has killed people to gain a place around the
Reaper’s table. He’s been covering up the murder of a mother and begged a former brother to shoot
him.

He’s not a mechanic, he’s a simple criminal who, no matter how furiously he’s washing his hands
with soap, will always leave stains behind. That’s the path he chose and it’s probably only fair he’s
paying for it. So he stays put, keeps his smile and answers the questions in a suitable voice and
manner. He manages to decline a portion of the rhubarb pie, since he’s not been able to finish the
main course and at least it’s not cherry — thank God it’s not fucking cherry — but it takes every ounce
of strength Juice has left to keep his calm and dignity, small as it is.

You went out good, sweetheart.

Tully’s voice echoes in his head and Juice is clutching the fabric in his jeans under the table,
mercifully covered by the fine, white linen cloth as he counts the spoonfuls the other three persons
takes between the conversation Juice may be invited to join, but isn’t really part of and he wouldn’t
be missed at the chair he’s sitting at, because it’s not his spot and he’s not a regular guest, but a
charity case and they all know that.
“Yes?”
“Sorry for the late hour, ma’m. My name’s Filip Telford and I’m lookin’ for Juice.”
“Juice?”
“Juan. Juan Carlos.”
“Is he expecting you?”

It’s like being thrown back to fucking Glasgow and having that old widow living across the street, Mrs. McKeith, staring him down to see what the little urchin Filip Telford is up to this time. Chibs smiles, which is stupid, because this little lady isn’t the least charmed by him, only intimidated by the scars, the long hair hanging in the face and the leather jacket.

“He’s an old friend of mine, ma’m. I’ve met with father Dawson as well.”

The woman doesn’t open the security chain, but nods in the doorway.

“Wait here, please.”

The door is closed – and locked – and Chibs rolls his eyes because really? Does he look like that much of a criminal without the patch, ink covered and seemingly unarmed? Truth is, he does, thanks to Jimmy O’Phelan, and this neat little lady has probably only seen scars caused by electric can-openers and needlework scissors.

When the door opens again, it’s the priest and he looks far less skeptical, almost cheerful.

“Mr. Telford, I was wondering if you’d come by! Come in.”

Chibs is baffled, not by the idea of priests drinking because Catholics aren’t exactly known for their temperance societies, but for the hearty invitation. He finds himself quickly, though.

“Thanks. And Filip’s fine.”
“Filip, sorry. We only just had dinner, by the way. Are you hungry?”
“Thanks, but I ate before I got here.”
“Allright. Juice is in the backyard.”
“Backyard?”
“Smoking.”

The priest smiles.

“I’m afraid Mrs. Ellis, our cherished housekeeper you just had the pleasure of meeting, would kill us all if we were smoking inside.”

It’s a poor attempt of a joke, and Chibs gives a half smile.

“He didn’t answer his phone.”
“I think he turned it off during dinner. We try and not take calls at meals.”
“I see. Can I... go out to ‘im?”
“Of course. This way.”
It’s an old, neat and damn boring house, but it’s way better than the motel. Chibs follows the priest past the kitchen door and stairs, down to the left and there, on the small back porch with cheap, plastic chairs, there’s a well-known figure in a dark hoodie sitting on the floorboards.

“Juice? You have a visitor.”

Juice turns around and he looks too calm, the hoodie hiding him a little and his smile is just a grimace of poorly hidden pain in the cloud of smoke.

“Thank you, padre.”
“T’l leave you two alone for a while.”

The priest leaves and Chibs walks out on the back porch and sits down by Juice’s side.

“Hi, Juicyboy.”
“Hi, Chibs.”
“How are ye?”
“Tired.”

One breath. Two. Chibs puts his arm around the stiff shoulders and the mask cracks. The man he calls kid is exhausted and tense, a wreck who’s tried to cover the holes for a whole day and is just drained now. Chibs pulls him closer, rubs the thin back and places kisses on the black hair.

“S’allright, muppet. S’allright…”

One of countless things holding no meaning, to say to someone bawling his eyes out. Chibs is no longer bothered by Juice’s crying. It’s like puking when you’re sick, he figures, only it’s the heart and not the guts causing it. Juice’s tears form a trail very far back and not that Chibs is one to cry often, but according to the rumors from Stockton, Juice didn’t even sniffle in his sleep. Didn’t seem like the kind of knowledge Chibs had any use for, and he definitely didn’t care personally, or so he told himself, so it slipped. But crying in prison, in the darkness in your bunk, is far from unusual.

After a while, you pick up the unspoken rule that what happens in your bunk at night, stays there, and unless it’s something that really disturbs others, it’s treated like there’s been a wall there. Chibs has fallen asleep to the sound of young boys and old men saving their sorrows for the pillow and the darkness for thousands of nights. All the unhealed wounds, the losses and sins, regretted or not, crashing down. Families, wives, sons and daughters. Mothers and brothers. Friends and comrades, aches and despairs, saved for the merciful night before the morning alarm calls you out to battle again. Only a psycho spits on a friend crying in the night and Chibs knows that Juice will stop when he can. That the best thing he can do right now, is to just allow it, to not add more shame or worry to it.
“They’re good to ye?”
“Yeah.”

He’s sitting in Chibs’ lap, leaning back against the man’s chest again and it’s like a piece of everything that was home to him, has returned. He doesn’t feel like an intruder or trash anymore, not with Chibs’ arm around him. He’s stopped crying too and the Scot strokes his hair.

“Got worried when ye didn’t pick up.”
“Sorry ‘bout that. Didn’t think Mrs. Ellis would tolerate anything interrupting her dinner.”
“The housekeeper?”
“Uh-huh. For some mysterious reason, she doesn’t want outlaw bikers in her dining room either.”

They both snicker at that and Chibs plants a kiss on his neck.

“Missed ye, Juicyboy.”
“After only a day?”

Chibs just hums.

“Wan’ me to stay with ye tonight?”
“Here?”
“No, at the street corner under a raincoat. Aye, here, ye muppet.”
“Think the priests will allow that?”
“Can only ask, mo chridhe…*”

Not that Chibs will take no for an answer unless he’s certain Juice is okay with sleeping on his own tonight. Juice doesn’t have to ask or ever wonder in silence, he just knows Chibs wont let him be alone in the dark yet without some precaution.

“Bed’s too small. And… you know… Doubt you’ll be comfortable on a mattress.”
“Hey, ye shared a kid sized bed with Opie once.”

Juice laughs. A good memory, the wet party over at Opie’s place one time when Donna and the kids were away. They’d all ended up fighting over the kingsized bed and for some fucking reason, it had been Jax and Tig sharing it with Otto while Chibs had passed out on the sofa and Opie and Juice, drunk as fuck, had decided they would absolutely fit into Ellie’s bed. Long story short, they absolutely didn’t and Donna was furious, Ellie cried and Piney had personally kicked Opie’s and Juice’s asses before sending them away to buy a ridiculously overprized princess bed for his granddaughter.

In the end it was worth it, because Ellie had been over the moon with the pink and white thing with laces and shit. Donna and Piney had been a little less upset once they learned that all the drunken animals at the party had paid a part of the monstrosity.

Chibs kisses his neck again and it sends little shivers of warmth down his spine.
“I'll stay with ye tonight, Juicyboy.”

Tonight. Every night. Juice isn’t asking for it aloud, doesn’t need to. It’s a dangerous wish, especially for someone who’s learned not to wish for anything more than his fair share, which is nothing. There’s still so much confusion and unlabeled shit to deal with.

“Wha’ if they don’t allow it?”
“Ye think that’ll be the first time I’d bribed some clerk? C’mom, lad, bribing Left-Footers is practically half of True IRA:s business.”
“Don’t scare the padres, Chibs. They’re nice to me.”
“Relax, muppet. I smoohtalked clerks while ye were still in nappies. Ye want me to stay or not?”
“Yeah.”
“Then shut up an’ let me do the talkin’, thinkin’ and worryin’.”

Juice laughs again.

“That’s what I do best, Chibs. Worrying.”
“Aye. That’s why ye should stop practisin’ it.”
“Just tell me one thing, okay?”
“If I can. What’s eatin’ ye?”
“That word… Cree, something… What does it mean?”

A small sigh, hesitation. The Scot buries his mouth against Juice’s neck and the whisper isn’t soft but a bit gruff, the sharp edges around the consonants like layers of gravel.

“Mo chridhe… Heart. My heart…”

Chapter End Notes

*my heart
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

I owe Within Temptation my gratitude for some inspiration to this chapter: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uHPNB9XNQH0

Apologies in advance if I turned a little too emotional in this chapter...

The bed isn’t made for two and Chibs knows he’ll feel like he’s aged with twenty years tomorrow morning. In the end, bribing wasn’t necessary and the priest seemed to understand. Juice had almost fallen asleep in Chibs’ lap on the backporch, the day’s stress falling from him so clear Chibs wasn’t the only one to see. He’d half expected being told to keep his hands off, but padre Mark, as Juice calls him, thank God isn’t stupid enough to think Chibs is staying for some fun under the covers.

Juice still feels so thin and small. They’re not sleeping naked, of course not, and the pair of sweats and tanktop make the kid’s body look even more worn-out. There are still bruises not yet healed from the flight in the woods, his breathing is still strained as the pneumonia takes longer time to heal completely, due to the malnurishment. The weightloss is much more visible like this, even in the darkness. For some reason, so are the big, hopelessly lost eyes, searching for a fixpoint. Chibs gently puts his arm out.

“C’n I hold ye?”

It’s so not his style to ask like this. Or doing any of this. Or is it? Juice, for all his fears, lacks any real borders and that vulnerability coming out of true honesty, wounds too deep for a shield of bravado to work anymore, is entirely something else than cowardice or weakness. After everything that happened, Juice still trusts him and Chibs hasn’t deserved that at all, or the way the exhausted man leans into his chest.

He needs this. Chibs’ tries to ignore the way his old heart is fluttering, how his head is spinning with diffuse and confused thoughts of saving the man in his arms. The need to hold and comfort him, carry him away to a safe place, stopping those tears once and for all and for once, just once, completely forget about what Juice may or may not deserve according to Chibs’ or the club’s moral code and be something else. Something that doesn’t fit under the sign of the Reaper, that doesn’t ask for or even need it’s – or anyone else’s – approval.

They’re not talking, don’t need to. There’s just the two of them in the silent embrace on a narrow bed and Chibs’ memory is groping for a reference, a warning sign, a landmark of any kind in his past that can explain why he’s laying right here this night. The more his mind is allowed to wander off, to leave the straight path of reason, the greater good, the club and the patch, oaths and brotherhood that has been Chibs steady ground since the day Sambel accepted him, the more clear seemingly clouded things appear.

People have let him down a number of times and each betrayal has hit hard, way harder than Chibs lets anyone see. He’s been careful, almost paranoid, with trust ever since Jimmy O betrayed him and beneath the hearty surface where cheerful nicknames, hugs and smiles are never far away, the path to Chibs’ heart is as narrow and difficult to travel on as his smile is wide and arms open. Juice was the
only one who felt like someone without capacity of scheming, the shy grin honest and the eyes flickering between insecurity and bravado, carefully hiding a longing of an extent Chibs still can’t fathom.

Juice, unknowingly, was the face of need. The need to be needed, to belong, to have someone saying his name and all he got was shallowness, jokes and people knowing how to use him. There’s no sense of self-preservation, borders or care for his own person. Juice isn’t depressed for loosing his cut, he’s too lost to even know who he is without it. That’s the deepest wound, the probably life-long belief that on his own, within himself, Juan Carlos Ortiz is nothing unless someone allows him a place somewhere. Not only saying his name, but giving him one.

“Juicyboy…”

That’s his name for the man. No one else calls Juice that and the brown, shiny eyes are gazing back in the dark room, radiating that fathomless need, a loneliness usually so well-hidden, Juice would be horrified if he knew what Chibs sees now.

“Say it again…”

Eyelids protecting him, the lashes soft against the dark rings under Juice’s eyes and the voice isn’t the one of a kid, or a young person, but the thirtysix year-old man who no longer knows who he is or where he’s heading.

“Juicyboy…”

He says it slow and soft, forming each letter in his husky, Scottish accent and Juice’s eyes are closing, his voice turning lower, heavy with exhaustion.

“Again… Say my name… Please, just say my name…”

And Chibs says it. Over and over again, voice slow and dulcet, soothing and unquestioning. He whispers the name of his heart closer and closer until he’s breathing it into those thin lips, feeling them on his own mouth and the eight letters are floating in the darkness, like an echo.

Juice is crying, but not as before. This isn’t exhaustion or confusion. It’s grief, but not only. Chibs watches, feels how not years, but a lifetime of fear, loneliness, confusion and self-hatred is overpowering the man in his arms. Skinless pain with too many faces, too much regret and too many sins that remained unforgiven for so long, they’ve taken hold.

He keeps whispering. The name, the forgiveness he’s already given and the appologies that’ll never be enough for Chibs to forgive himself. He forms words of the absolution he’s not worthy of giving, the love he couldn’t put into true words when the man in his arms needed them the most, and the regret for the penitence he sentenced him to before truly listening to any kind of defence.

It’s a display of raw emotions, a peak inside a completely open part of Juice’s mind, only a sliver of the weight he’s been carrying around, hidden for everyone. Chibs cries too, helpless to resist the plead for acknowledgement, the desperate wish from Juice for Chibs to see him, see him and not the Reaper. Their lips turn numb, whispers become hoarse and Chibs finally understands. It’s not where he goes or the loneliness following their departure that scares Juice the most. It’s the fear of what Chibs will take with him, what the Reaper will harvest once the words of forgiveness have been spoken and there’s silence once again. When no one will say his name anymore, neither with love nor hate and all that’s left is a great, horrifying nothing.
Chibs’ voice isn’t audible anymore, only the moves of his lips forms the word. The name of the only man he loves the way he loves women, the one person stirring up feelings he can’t compare with anything or anyone in his past. He curves his sore lips for all the times he didn’t, barely aware of the shrinking distance, the borders of time melting away and how the Reaper finally becomes still and silent, lowering his scythe not to strike, but to rest.
The brown eyes are a shade different this morning. Something has stirred the serious gaze skating over Juice’s face, left it wider and naked. Juice swallows.

“You’re still here…”

Chibs nods. No snort, no brisk words or jokes. Just a small, affirmative nod and a callous finger stroking Juice’s cheek. Pepper dark eyes looking everywhere and nowhere, unable to fixate on one point, as if not knowing what to expect and Juice realises the Scot isn’t capable of forming any words right now. It’s still very early, after all.

They’re dressed, Juice in sweats and a t-shirt, Chibs in his jeans and wifebeater. Juice involuntarily shivers, he’s not really cold but he can’t control his body heat that well and Chibs sits up, undresses on his upper body and carefully pulls Juice’s t-shirt off. Then he simply pulls Juice into his arms, closing around him like a human heating device. Bulk swallowing bones and Juice’s body just melts into it, the warmth and strong softness.

A small sigh ending in a hum, tells him that Chibs likes him there, pressed close onto his chest. It sounds like he does, feels like it too but Juice still has to ask.

“You… you wanna be here…?”

Another nod, eyes closed this time and Juice feels how one of the man’s hands squeezes his shoulder and then his neck, soft and gentle. Their lips meet just as light, a tentative brush without haste or desperation. They’re hardly moving, reminding more of bumping heads than kissing, just touching in stillness.

It’s so tender, no lust in the way Chibs leans closer, nuzzling warily and he whispers Juice’s name, calls him Juicyboy in a voice bearing warmth but no heat.

“Mo chridhe… A thasgaidh… My darling… Lil’ darlin’… Wouldn’t wanna be anywhere else, ye hear me? An’ I… I’ll say yer name a thousand bloody times if tha’s… if tha’s wha’ ye… wha’ ye need… to stay with me, Juicyboy. Can’t loose ye again… Juicy…”

Chibs says his name, again and again and the almost manical repetition keeps Juice in the right time and place. The right arms, the right voice rhythmic like a rosary prayer and the tickling feeling of lips and beard whispering life into him again, filling the seemingly bottomless emptiness with breaths of his own name, reminding him of who he used to be. What he once was and doesn’t think he’ll ever be again. Not in whole.

And just like that, the name disappears from Chibs’ lips, dissolves in tongues, teeth and slick, wordless warmth. The older man opens up to him so easily, or is it the other way around? Does it matter? And if it does – to whom? Juice feels no arousal, no excitement or fear. He knows where he is, can feel it’s Chibs’ body and his own. Inked skin, bleached out ink, warm hands trailing up and down spines and flesh, scars and so much history too late to change.

An unchangable past and unknown future. The now has been nothing but pain for Juice for so long, it’s a small miracle he’s not exploding from the contrast this instant. Strangely, his body is not screaming, only squeaking a bit from the unusual moves. Juice closes his eyes and there’s darkness,
the wrong kind, no Chibs and when he fumbles, he hears the hoarse voice calling him back, saying his name with such sharp and clear sweetness, and the darkness doesn’t dissolve but is printed with stars.

Prickles from each acute, Scottish syllable are piercing the dreary veil, not dissolving it but opening up spots for light and air to shine through again.

*Juice! Come back to me, Juicy!*

The next second, he opens his eyes and he’s back in the man’s arms.

“You’re still here…”

Chibs just nods, scared from seeing Juice pass a border where he couldn’t follow and Juice pulls up his arm, moves Chibs’ hand from his back to his chest and grips his shoulder.

“Let me hold you, Chibbie…”
Chapter 12

Jimmy O taught him patience. More than the army, more than IRA ever did. In what now seems like a lifetime ago, Chibs believed Jax was a man of patience too. He wasn’t, that’s why he needed Chibs and Bobby. The downfall would’ve come far earlier on without them and while Chibs was less open with his disappointment, Bobby was older and had no background in a violent separatist group where death was a part of the cause. Killing others never was a part of the idea of Samcro and Bobby personified the idea of the club more than anyone.

Chibs still wants to believe Jax could’ve been a different man, had he listened to him and Bobby instead of Gemma and Clay. The kid showed signs of sense and even righteousness when he was younger but no one in Samcro’s, or even the entire Son’s history, has more blood on his hands. No matter how you see it, Juice was a scapegoat and it’s not until recently that Chibs sees the chilling lack of warmth in Jax’s “sons don’t kill themselves”. John would never have said it like that, motionless, like it was more about the club – no, him – than a brother’s pain. Yes, suicide is the coward’s way out, but once Juice had told Chibs the reason it made, not more sense, but Chibs’ anger had melted away enough for him to forget about the sense of betrayal.

Juice is holding him now. It’s been ages since Chibs was the little spoon with anyone, for good reasons, but Juice’s grip around him is strangely comforting. Chibs’ lips and throat are sore from the manical whispers in the darkness but the night went without nightmares or screams and he was too exhausted himself to not fall asleep as soon as Juice had come to rest. He’ll need some cough drops and a good backrub thanks to the narrow bed, but that’s all.

The arm around his chest is still brawny, apparently Juice didn’t skip workout in prison, and he must’ve eaten enough to… be left alone. Chibs has had his moments of despair and depression. Times when nothing seemed to fit together or make any sense. But there was always something to pull him out of his head in time: a mission, the club, Fiona and most of all Kerrianne. Chibs sends her money every month even if Fiona says the lass needs to learn to be on her own.

She’s not serious, not really, she does it because that’s how she was raised and Fiona lives in perpetual fear of spoiling her daughter too much. Outsourcing that to an already distant father with way more money than his simple habits and vices require, is a good way to come around that. In fact, despite all her talking of independence and bad, American influence, Fi loves that Chibs is giving their daughter the chance to a youth they themselves couldn’t even dream of. And since Ratboy after lots of nagging, persuaded Chibs to install Skype and get him an account on the office computor – yes, Chibs is a dinosour and doesn’t own a computor of his own – he’s been able to talk and also see his kid more than he has in years.

It should’ve been Juice to install that. Chibs knows he thought that when he gave in for Ratboy’s chivvy. Sure, Ratboy and even Chucky are managing the tech shite far better than old bastards like Chibs, but they don’t have Juice’s natural talent for it. The kid’s basically a criminal nerd who just happened to be almost as good with bikes as computors…

A small twitch against his legs pulls him out of his thoughts. Juice must’ve fallen asleep again, only to be rattled by another nightmare. Chibs tries to move, but the grip only tightens and he goes still, stroking the arm locking his body. Flesh is weak and the warm pressure against his back and arse is having an effect on him that’s no longer surprising, just fucking inconvenient. Morning wood is a bitch but Chibs is no teenager or animal, nor too insecure in his manhood to feel uncomfortable. He’ll never take anything up the arse unless he’s in intolerable pain and the only meds available are
suppositories and feeling a sleeping man’s dick against it won’t change that.

Patience… Chibs tries to ignore the pressure, the shape of Juice’s cock moving with the involuntary twitches the nightmare is giving him. It’s textbook PTSD, these nightly horrors that won’t stop even with benzos and Zopiclone, because it’s not the nightmares that scare Juice the most, but waking up alone. Chibs knows he doesn’t have all the pieces to this puzzle in place yet, not by far, but he understands and accepts that it’s far more complicated than it seemed at first.

Every little safe place, escape route and back-up in Juice’s life has been connected with the club. There’s no family, no friends, not even business partners or acquaintances around him, not a single soul caring about his sorry ass without that patch on his back. The desperate plea for Chibs to keep saying his name, is not about making Chibs acknowledge his existence, but to silence whatever voice in the kid’s head, telling him he’s got nothing left and no one to use his name without disgust. How well does Chibs even know this man? Did anyone in the club ever come close enough?

Chibs knows they didn’t. If anyone had, perhaps Juice wouldn’t have taken a swing from a tree in the first place. At least it would’ve minimized the risk. The kid never did an second attempt, after all, and on the wall of fame in the clubhouse one of the first nine, Wally Grazer, along with John and Jax Teller, is hanging despite the suicide and no one questioned that. Sons don’t kill themselves… Such a hypocritical thing to say, for someone who held a father he never met on a pedestal, who’d done exactly that.

Yes, Jimmy O taught him patience. Fiona taught him strength, Kerrianne taught him unconditional love and Jax how the loyalty to a sociopath makes you blind no matter how hard you try to be the voice of reason. And Juice…

Chibs knows that even if the club by some miracle should open it’s arms for Juice again, re-patch him, forgive and forget and fully accept their pres’ sudden interest in men – one man – it wouldn’t be enough. The man in his arms is too broken and they’re both completely f*cked up together. These feelings, this need for Juice goes so deep Chibs can’t find the start of it, and it scares as much as it tantalizes him. He’s been shutting it off with hard words of reason and duty, treason and responsibility, with loads of work and a goal demanding his full attention, only leaving room for mindless fucking and drinking. That’s how he made it through and he has no reason to lie here and get upset about it.

Juice once again moves restlessly and this time, Chibs unlocks the man’s arms around him and turns so he can face him. Juice is whining quietly, still sleeping, and Chibs gets a pitiful picture of how the last three years, a thousand nights, have been for the man alone in his bunk. Chibs can’t erase them, no one can, but he can do his best to not remind Juice of them by leaving him alone again. Not physically, or mentally.

He pulls Juice close, facing him this time. The eyelashes flutter from the twitches the eyelids make and Chibs starts rocking the body in his arms, softly to make the transition from sleep to wake a little easier, perhaps even killing off the nightmare before it takes over. He kisses the forehead, the cheeks and brushes against the tense, trembling mouth.

“Juice… Juicyboy…?”

The man moans something, it’s just a sound, and his face is one of fear. His hands are tensing into fists and Chibs keeps talking, keeps rocking and kissing him to soothe the way, but it only makes the man cry in his sleep and that’s it for Chibs. He pats Juice’s cheeks, raises his voice and shakes him a little rougher, praying that he won’t scream.
“Wake up, lad! Ye’re dreamin’ again.”

Suddenly wide-opened brown eyes, glassy from fear and tears, and for a fraction of a second Juice so clearly doesn’t recognize him, but it’s over almost immediately and the man sighs, clutching Chibs’ hand.

“You’re here...?”

It’s a question this time, the nightmare still hasn’t disappeared, and Chibs nods before reaching to turn the small bedlamp on. The light is a bit sharp and Juice squeezes his eyes shut but he doesn’t seem to drift back to the nightmare.

“Still here, Juicyboy. Still right here with ye... Ye daft muppet...”

The namecalling that’s an endearment elicits a bright smile, a sharp contrast to the angst ridden eyes and it reminds so much of the man Chibs unknowingly fell in love with all those years ago, that in this moment, Chibs is convinced he’s really back again, if only for a moment.

“I love ye... Ye know that...?”

“Love you too, Chibs.”

But he doesn’t know. Not really. It’s too early, too much of a contrast to the years of isolation and Chibs understands. He presses a soft kiss on the man’s mouth and the brown eyes are still a little wide and damp, but the fear is gone for now and Chibs wants it to stay away.

“Listen, Juice... There’s no other place I’d rather be than right here with ye right now.”

“Not even a king sized bed?”

Juice suddenly has that shit-eating grin again and Chibs knows it’s a way to cover up the weakness, but he understands and plays along with a snort.

“Aye. An’ someone who doesn’t steal the blanket.”

“You’re the one with a built-in padding.”

“Ye’re callin’ me fat?”

“I’m calling you a human hot pad.”

“Tha’s just a fancy way of callin’ me a fat bastard.”

The lad laughs and places a hand on Chibs’ still quite mighty belly, then using the other to grab Chibs’ fist and press it over his own navel. Chibs hasn’t really taken a closer look at how the weightloss is showing on all of Juice’s body, and the belly might be flatter and ripped, you don’t loose all muscles that easily, but it doesn’t look good or healthy at all. It’s hollow, skin too stretched and the sixpack looks weird, unnatural without meat and fat on.

“If you’re a fat bastard, then I’m the fucking machinist.”

They’ve both seen the movie and Chibs rolls his eyes.

“Christ, what are we? Fucking girls comparing bellies, Jesus...”

Juice becomes serious again but doesn’t take his hand away. Instead he makes circles, traces the scar leading straight up from Chibs’ navel, ending a few inches below the chest. The million dollar bill tat
is a peak back into his childhood, poor as hell, and Chibs sure loves his money although no way as much as he loves his family and freedom. Or the Reaper.

“Don’t wanna be anywhere else either… or with… anyone else…”

The voice is very low, but calm. Firm, almost confident and Chibs had no idea he was capable of being this close to a creature as fragile as this man, who beneath the cracking facade has a core of something far stronger than Jax, John, Gemma or even Fiona ever had. The strength that lies in being stripped bare, broken down, crushed and loosing everything down to the sound of a loved one saying his name and despite all that, this stupid, stubborn little broken heart, is still able to love. Even someone who let him down. That’s the lesson Juice is giving him. To raise from the ashes and look up with a shit-eating grin, even if the past is crushing you, and not forget but always, always forgive when given the chance.
Chibs leaves before breakfast. It could’ve been sneaky, but he actually didn’t try to sneak and politely declined breakfast when padre Mark asked. Juice thinks there’s just the slightest hint of a flush on the scarred cheeks and Chibs doesn’t hug him before leaving, just giving a small pat on the shoulder and a weary but warm look that says more than any of them want to show now.

“Did you sleep well?”

Chibs has already left when the priest asks that, thank God, and now it’s Juice’s turn to blush as he turns from the closed door.

“Thanks, yeah. Was… easier with…”

He doesn’t finish the sentence and is already regretting saying that much but padre Mark just nods.

“Yeah, no wonder. New place and all. It was good of him to stay with you.”

“Thanks for… allowing it, padre.”

“No problem. Mrs. Ellis just called for breakfast.”

Called for? Sounds like a 40’s movie or something and so does the bell ringing again. Seriously? It’s not that big a house and there are only three people living here apart from her. Juice follows the priest to the dining room and padre Mark turns around, smiling.

“I’ve tried to convince her to let us have breakfast in the kitchen and not the castle of doom, but it’s an ongoing battle still, I’m afraid. This is her Downton Abbey.”

“Downton what?”

“Oh, you missed that? Well, it’s about…”

Considering how early it is, this man is really chatty. The older priest is having breakfast in bed due to old age and that means Juice is placed on the opposite side of the table, facing padre Mark and once this time the places look equally set, the only difference being the blue napkin ring on Juice’s place, while the priest has a case with his initials embroidered on it. Subtle and as the priest keeps talking, Mrs. Ellis enters with a tray.

“Good morning, Father! Juan.”

Juice is grateful he doesn’t stutter his good morning because the housekeeper really is a quite impressive figure and he still feels completely out of place here. Mrs. Ellis serves up boiled eggs and oatmeal – Juice can’t remember ever eating that outside prison – with honey and cinnamon, two small glasses of orange juice and puts a jug with milk on the table before she leaves. His own portion is small, she must’ve remembered he couldn’t finish his dinner yesterday. Good. The priest says grace and then puts a cup at Juice’s place.

“Your pills.”

“Uhm… thanks.”

He doesn’t even know what all these little pills of wonder are, only that he’s promised to take them. It’s part of the deal for staying here and he swallows them like the obedient little shit he is. It’s easier than questioning or refusing. He then takes up his spoon and tries the oatmeal. It’s hot, not lukewarm
as in prison, and the sliver of honey is nice and sweet. He used to have a bit of a sweet tooth before… well, before he lost all interest in food. Or anything else.

“Where did you grow up, Juice?”
“Queens.”
“With your parents?”
“What about your mother?”
“Died when I was sixteen. Cancer.”
“I’m sorry to hear that.”

Juice shrugs.

“Happened twenty years ago, padre.”
“You have any contact with your sister or stepfather?”
“No.”

Why would he? The oatmeal is growing in his mouth, he eats slow and keeps his eyes on the plate.

“I’m sorry, Juan, I shouldn’t ask you personal stuff so head-on and especially not at breakfast. My social skills have always been a bit poor before my morning coffee.”

That smile again. A little self-ironic, warm and full of kindness.

“I’m from Birmingham myself but I don’t have any family left there. Was born in a place called Charnwood Forest, but we moved to Birmingham when I was a toddler, so I consider that my origin. No siblings, unfortunately.”

He doesn’t mention why that’s unfortunate, but he’s not specifically mentioned a mom or dad either and that could mean there’s a not so funny reason why he leaves them out. Juice has never been good with follow-up questions unless it’s about bikes or computers – or a club job – because he doesn’t know what normal people actually talk about except for the weather, their jobs and kids. The weather is the only one he can add anything to and it’s still the stupidest subject of discussion since the weather is literally out there and takes seconds to describe and that’s it. And he doesn’t want to encourage this priest to dig deeper by showing too much interest. His backstory is dull and ordinary at best, ugly and depressing at worst and no different from thousands of other working poor peoples’. At least not before the Sons.

“You have any plans for the day?”

Juice almost laughs. Almost.

“Staying alive, I guess.”

He doesn’t mean it as a snark, really, and he swallows.

“Sorry, padre, didn’t mean to…”
“I like straight answers. It, as your Scottish friend put it, saves time.”

This time Juice laughs. It’s short and more of a snort, but the mention of Chibs makes him smile. It’s such a Chibbie thing to say.
“You know you can see him, right?”

Padre Mark speaks very soft now, too soft and Juice swallows. Nods.

“How... Thanks.”
“This isn’t a prison and you’re a grown man, Juice. I understand this is all a bit of a shock for you, but I’m not gonna keep you in a leash here.”
“Need to find a job.”
“Not yet. You need to build up some strength first, Juice. Eat and sleep well, relax, not think too much.”

Juice smiles.

“That could be difficult, padre, unless you planned on keeping me sedated 24/7.”
“I don’t. You enjoy reading?”
“The MC isn’t exactly a book club.”
“And that’s not exactly an answer to my question.”

No bullshit. Still soft, but the tone is just one shade sharper and Juice swallows.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to be a dick. Fuck... I mean...”

This is not good and Juice is prepared to be asked – ordered – to leave.

“You like fantasy and sci fi?”
“Uhm...”

Juice doesn’t know what to answer and he feels so out of place. Padre Mark puts his spoon down and takes a sip of his coffee.

“I think I might have a book that will suit you. I’m afraid it lacks motorbikes, but it’s got Wildfolk.”
“Wildfolk?”

The priest just smiles and it’s that kind of smile again, like the man could see right through him if he wanted to but won’t, because he’s not an intruder. He’ll just keeps knocking until someone answers. Juice silently hopes the man’s patience will run out.
Chapter 14

“Tried something new last night, pres? Drunken karaoke, perhaps?”

The boys laugh at Tig’s snark and Chibs swallows another mouthful of Chucky’s coffee, giving his VP the finger. No doubt they all think their pres is hoarse from eating pussy and drinking too much somewhere last night, except for Tig but his teasing is expected. Chibs hatred for performing anything, especially karaoke, is well-known.

“Was it a ginger? You know, ‘cause they’ll suck your soul out.”

Ratboy sounds completely serious and Tig nods.

“Yeah, you do look a little pale, Chibbie. Was she Irish?”
“Fuck off, Tiggy.”
“Sang some homeland ballads, I guess… Had some Drambuie…”
“… crying and playing bagpipes…”

Chibs’ glare is enough to make Ratboy shut up and Tig walks up close to the guy, slapping his ass.

“Move along, kid. Let the adults talk and go practising your racist jokes.”
“You started it, man!”
“That’s because I’m good at it.”

Ratboy just rolls his eyes and slumps off to the garage. Tig elegantly kicks the door after him, closing the office right before Chucky’s nose. He accepts that.

“You hit him?”
“Wha’?”
“Fucked. You fucked him?”
“Who? Juice?”
“No, the priest. Yes, Juice, you idiot.”
“Tha’s all ye can think of?”

He sounds a little angrier than he actually is and Tig shrugs.

“Not judging you, brother.”

Chibs snorts.

“Tha’s comforting, considering ye hit a corpse.”
“Two, actually.”
“Jesus Christ… Not tha’ it’s yer business, but no, I didn’t fuck’im.”
“Pity. Heard he’s good on his stomach.”
“There’s a rumor I shouldn know ‘bout, or wha’?”

Tig suddenly looks concerned and that’s not good. His tastless sense of humor is bad, but that look is worse.

“Spit it out.”
“Talked to Quinn the other day and he’d met up with some of the guys from Indian Hills.”
“And?”
“Gaines is doing time in Stockton now and he had some things to say about Juice.”

Chibs feels lead in his stomach.

“Gaines is inside again? For what?”
“Drunk driving.”

Chibs snorts and Tig snickers. It’s always the small shit that eventually gets you picked up by the cops before they get to the heavy stuff.

“Juice snitched again?”

There’s not been a word about any snitching, not to anyone, since Juice went inside and Chibs doesn’t want to hear that Juice is all the things he’s started to think he isn’t.

“Nah, nothing like that. Before Jax rode off… The chinks wanted revenge for Juice taking Lin out. Jax had already given Tully permission and the chink told him about the green light, but he didn’t take the offer. They raped him while the guard was watching. All three of them. He didn’t make a sound.”

Tig sounds too calm and Chibs swallows.

“Who told Gaines?”
“The guard, Henderson or something, has a loose mouth.”
“Ye mean…”
“That Juice rather took three chinks up the ass than taking Tully out, despite knowing…”
“Tha’ we’d greenlighted ‘im.”
“Only we hadn’t officially. Jax did.”

Privately, behind everyones back. There’s a lot of things you do for the Reaper, but not this. Not saving the club with the last scrap of dignity you have left, even when knowing your sacrifice wasn’t worth shit to the pres or anyone. Just the means to an end. Suddenly, Chucky’s coffee is making a riot and Chibs scrambles to grab the trashbin before throwing up.

The Triads are wiped out and Tully is dead too. The Aryans have laid low since that bastard was killed and their new shot caller is nothing but an inbred little shit who probably has to think hard to put the right shoe on right foot. And Jax… Jax who was supposed to move the club in a new and better direction. Always so concerned, so focused on a better future for his boys… Chibs’ guts make another turn but there’s nothing left to throw up, only a sour taste of acid.

It’s all so ugly. Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me. Fool Chibs Telford and you’ll regret it, fool him again and you’ll die regretting your stupidity… He can’t do a shit now. There’s no one to execute vengeance on, at least none that matters. Chibs is a hard man and knows that only the IRA brand saved his sorry ass from Juice’s fate during his first stints. Young cons are always prey but the IRA had Chibs’ back and that made him confident. He never experienced being literally on the bottom in every way in prison and even after the IRA ex-communicated him, the transfer to Sambel and then Samcro happened so fast he never really stood completely alone.

Chibs knows he earned the trust and although rapists disgust him and he never once forced himself onto anyone, or encouraged or sanctioned anyone else to do it, he also knows the drill in prisons.
And Juice, looking younger than he is thanks to the insecurity that radiates from him, is practically a feast for the eye for any con desperate to release some pressure with something else than his own hand. Hell, they even used that one time to get protection for the club inside and Juice nearly died from it.

“Chibs…? You okay, man?”

No, he’s not. He’s not okay in any fucking way, but takes the bottle of whiskey Tig is handing him and takes a huge gulp. His body should hate him for it, but it helps, always has and he takes a deep breath and stands.

“Call Stockton. I want a meeting with Gaines asap, paid room, no mics. Don’ care who we have to pay.”
“And what about Juice?”
“Make sure tha’ everyone knows he’s off limit or they’ll end up with a permanent smile tha’ll make mine look like a beauty mark. And I want someone watchin’ ‘im.”

Tig snorts.

“Yeah, right… And who’d want to babysit a rat currently under watch by a priest? The prospects?”
“Ye and Venus.”
“Are you fucking kidding me?”

Chibs leaps forward, grabbing his VP by the shirt.

“Call Stockton. Then ye get hold on Venus and when I’m back here, I wan’ her in here for a talk.”
“You’re not pulling my old lady into this mess, Chibs.”
“Aye, I am. ‘Cause right now, ye two are the only people I trust ‘im with.”
“Because you love him…”
“Aye, because I love’im, brother.”

And not as a brother, but as… something else. His grip around the shirt is loosening and Tig just nods, no more jokes or smart comments anymore. His oldest friend still breathing, who knows much more than he gives away, is looking straight at him without judgement, disgust or questioning. Trust. Understandment. Tig loves the Reaper, but he loves the man who knows she's a woman more and because he knows what it's like being denied what he wants the most, he isn’t judging. He pats Chibs’ shoulder.

“Go to him, brother. Give the priest a heads-up and prepare him for the freak show. And make sure your little idiot understands we’re not the execution squad. Still want to punch his stupid face, though, so he better not give me a reason.”
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Note: This chapter is taking place shortly after breakfast, before Chibs is back at the club house and talking to Tig.

_Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried._ **Ruth 1:16-17**

Juice holds up the Bible quote marker put inside the book. _Daggerspell_. He’s never heard of it and it’s clearly not religious. Katharine Kerr, a name as unknown as the title. It’s from 1986 and the copy is well-thumbed, apparently read many times. Inside the cover, Mark Dawson is written with small black lead letters, not very elegant but more like a teen not too interested in handwriting would scrap it down.

The marker, in contrast, is painted with watercolors and the quote with calligraphy. Handmade, and it’s nice. No initials but it looks personal, maybe the priest did it himself. Juice isn’t well-versed in the Bible, honestly he fell asleep most Sundays when he was dragged to church. Got the belt for it afterwards, of course, but the padre’s voice simply was so difficult not to fall asleep to. Sunday mass, first communion lessons and confirmation was boring as hell and Juice honestly doesn’t remember much more than listening to the drowsy sound of padre Theodor and smelling the scent of cherry chewing gum from a cute girl with curly hair in pigtails. Juice was too shy to pull them, but he used to stare at them, wondering how those corkscrew shapes locks were made and how they would feel to touch. Thinking of it, wasn’t her name Ruth?

He shivers and pulls his knees up to his chest. The room is a little bit chilly even with the knitted blanket on the bed. Juice can’t remember freezing this much before Stockton or even inside. Maybe he was just too shut down to feel it. Since the woods, however, he seems to have turned into an old man in this regard. He could just as well start whining out loud about drafter. Juice yanks the pillow behind his back and opens the book:

_Men see life going from a dark to a darkness. The gods see life as a death…_  
- _The Secret Book of Cadwallion the Druid_

The fuck is this? Juice mutters internally but starts reading, skeptical as he could be. He’s not bad at reading, quite the contrary actually, but he’s not used to it anymore. Last time he finished a book must’ve been when the club went off to Belfast, on the journey. A Stephen King novel, probably. Something long and distracting enough to keep his mind from reelng, but not too heavy or high and mighty to make him loose focus or feel stupid. Programming stuff too, if he remembers correctly, and Chibs teased him about it.

_Watch it, Juicyboy. If ye don’ hide tha’ giant brick, Maureen Ashby will think ye’re tryin’ to get into Trinity’s knickers. Tha’ lass is a bookworm and she has a thing for lost puppies too._

Another memory that hasn’t popped up in years. Crap. His focus clearly is as bad as ever, his mind
just reeling and the marker is distracting too. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people… He’s got no people, no family anymore and that’s his own fault. He’s a stranger, a guest and a charity case… no, not entirely. Juice obliviously rubs his temporal bones, as if he could summon his bad thoughts like genies and make them leave.

He used to have a people of his own. He chose them and they chose him. Chibs’ smile, the proud look in his eyes the day Juice patched in, even if Juice was Jax’s prospect. Jax had looked pleased, Bobby as always brimming with nostalgia whenever new blood was added to the family, new men to make the club better and strive forward. Clay had been grinning in the cloud of smoke from his perpetual cigarrs and there’d been pats and laughs, jokes and headrubs from others.

Chibs had looked like he was relieved that Juice had been accepted. His hug had been harder than usual, he’d actually dug his fingernails into Juice’s shoulders, almost grasped for him and the brotherly kiss on cheek just a shade more emotional. A second later it was Opies turn to embrace him and the grasp was gone.

Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you… That’s exactly what Juice did. Not in words, but with his actions. He wants to throw the book and marker away, but he’s just a rat, a coward and a charity case who’s been offered to read this out of kindness and he tries to focus.

He makes a surprisingly good start, not that he realises that himself, and despite the initial uninterest and worry, not to mention his lack of interest in fantasy and sci-fi, he’s soon sucked into the story about an old man waiting for his dead love to be reborn. Weird shit, but it’s fiction and Juice probably isn’t the right person to judge. Not when he’s offered a chance to silence his own mind – and fill out the silence Chibs left behind this morning. The blanket is a poor substitute for the Scot’s arms and Juice shouldn’t be thinking of that either, because no one can guarantee he’ll have that again. If the last years have tought him anything, it’s how dangerous it is to long for something you don’t deserve.
Chapter 16

It’s not often Chibs bribes prison guards. Since all the heat with Jax were cooling off, the need for it has decreased some as well. Usually, it’s enough to let the Sons currently incarcerated run things and just wait for them to reach out. This, how ever, isn’t straight out club business but personal on more than one level and Chibs doesn’t trust any ears but his own. The priest clearly wasn’t happy about getting unknown people to see Juice, but he also seems to have decided to trust Chibs. At least when it comes to not letting potential assassins invade his home.

Chibs walks through the standard procedure for visitors, giving the guard searching him his most charming smile.

“How’re ye doin’ these days, Nancy?”
“Oh, you know me. Living on the edge in here.”
“Aye, zoo keeper is a rough job.”
“Fuck off, Telford.”
“Thought ye missed me, lass.”
“About as much as I miss my ulcer. Alright, you’re clear. Sign here.”

Nancy Gregor is actually one of the better guards. Not that Chibs likes any of them, but as far as a prison staff goes, she’s quite tolerable. Not the right one to bribe personally, but she wont interfer when she knows someone else is, as long as she thinks there’s no bloody aftermath coming from it. And Chibs has never belonged to the most violent clientel during his stints. He signs the paper, gets his little visitors plate and leaves lighter, gun, knife and phone in the plastic bag with his name and social security number on.

“Don’ try an’ go through my phone. T’is locked anyway.”
“I didn’t think you knew enough numbers to make a pin code.”
“Life’s full of surprises, darling. Who knows? One ye may even get a raise. Or a man.”

He gets her smug smile and a headshake.

“Always the ladies man, Telford. Sure it’s worth the time and money to get cozy with Gaines? I mean, we have some quite ladylike internees as well.”
“Thanks, but I’ll pass. I’ll give my VP a heads up, though.”

That wipes her smugness off. She’s met both Tig and Venus and although they’ve not been flashy about their relationship, they’ve been hooked up for almost four years and gossip makes the inmates’ world go round. Nancy Gregor doesn’t look too thrilled about it.

“You have twenty minutes.”
“An’ the arrangement?”

Nancy Gregor just gives a nod at Chibs’ cut and he hands out a discrete pack of bills. The guard counts them quickly before stashing them her own pocket.

“That’ll do. We’ll have some technical problems…”
“Good.”
“Let’s get moving, Telford.”
He follows her to the visitor’s room and sits down. He’s alone in there, no guards and after a few minutes, the inmates’ entrance opens and the pale Irishman with carrot hair and perpetually unimpressed eyes comes in, gets his handcuffs unlocked and sits down. The guard leaves and Gaines reaches his hand out for Chibs.

“Trager told me it was an emergency. Pity. I almost thought ye missed me.”
“Aye, I’m known for my big heart.”

Gaines snickers.

“Wha’ can I do for ye, brother?”
“Everthing runnin’ smooth in’ere?”
“Aye. Some smaller beefs, but mostly internal. Black and brown.”

Chibs just nods. No bigger changes stirring the fragile peace on the street, which is good. That’s not what he’s here for though, and he leans forward, resting his elbows on he table.

“Good. I have a question ‘bout a more personal matter, so to say. T’is of… great importance this doesn’t leave this room.”

Gaines snorts.

“Ye’re questioning my loyalty, brother?”
“I’m just pointing out the seriousness of the issue, brother.”

Now the man looks curious.

“Don’ waste anymore time then, pres.”
“It’s about Juice.”
“Juice? Oh… Ortiz?”
“Aye.”
“Tully’s little sweetheart… No one thought he’d survive.”

He shakes his head, as if the very idea is unbelievable and maybe it is. Chibs swallows.

“There was a guard telling you…”
“That Ortiz got fucked by the chinks. Literally and figuratively. Kept his mouth shut though. Was supposed to take Tully out in change for protection from the MC but the little idiot turned it down. Henderson thought it was pretty hilarious.”
“An’ Tully?”
“Don’ know the details, man, but Teller handed Ortiz over to’im. Tully wasn’t exactly the social type but some of the more chatty hicks spread it around tha’ although Teller never intended for Ortiz to earn the patch back, he let Tully believe that.”
“In order to let Juice take Lin out?”
“Aye. Tully wasn’t known for taking In-Betweeners under his wing, so to say, but he wasn’t very impressed with Teller either. Some even talked ‘bout him deliberately missing…”

The wound was fatal, yes, but Tully could easily have been more efficient. Chibs grits his teeth.

“An’ Juice didn't snitch…?”
“Not a word, brother. Not while in here an’ he could’v taken the entire club down. And I’m sorry, I know ye loved’im, but Jax Teller was a fucking psycho. He didn’t give a shite ‘bout the club an’ he
let Ortiz believe he could earn his way back.”
“Why are ye telling me this now?”
“Cause the currant shotcaller for the AB apparently doesn’t like Tully’s pet to run around alive.”

Chibs frowns.

“Ye lost me there… The hell’s AB’s interest for a dead shot caller’s prison bitch? After this long time? It makes no fucking sense, man. Otis is an inbred lowlife but he aint a complete moron.”

Gaines shrugs.

“Tha’s always been yer problem, Filip. Ye think people do shite for good reasons. T’is ain’t ‘bout Ortiz or the Sons. T’is about Otis tryin’ to clean up the Aryan’s reputation and make people forget tha’ their former shot caller was shagging a brownie bitch an’ not only failed to take’im out, but ran errands for the MC…”
“Jesus Christ… Why didn’t they just take’im out while he was still inside?”

Gaines lets out something almost akin to a laugh.

“Really, Filip? The kid survived that stab, returned from the protective custody and then shared cell with Tully. No one messed with his bitches, ye know tha’. And when he was put down, Juice put his new cellie, a bloke twice his size, into a comas for grabbin’ his ass, for Christ’s sake. I’ll tell ye, people saw’im as some kind of ghost, he’d already survived wha’ was supposed to be a lethal stab wound an’ no one wanted to risk shite just to put out some crazy ass bitch who didn’t even had a patch anymore.”
“Except AB’s newest shot caller?”
“Apparantly e’s aint afraid of no ghosts.”
“Only his reputation…”
“Tully liked Ortiz, fucked up as it may seem.”

Chibs snorts. Yeah, that’s kind of a fucked up thing to assume, but Gaines just shrugs again.

“Never said it makes sense, brother. But the bottom line is, Otis has a little house cleaning going on an’ since he couldn’t get anyone close to Ortiz from the inside…”
“E’s takin’ care of it himself now… Shite… Ye know this is all a wee bit to tangled for the nazis?”
“Most of the AB have the feds up their arses an’ Ortiz has, according to rumors, been quite well guarded. Not that easy to take out without raising too much attention. Not worth the risk with a quick try.”

That makes sense, at least. The AB hasn’t exactly been armed and ready since Otis took over and whatever interal beefs they’ve had, it’s given both the MC, black and brown some respite. With Juice more or less under some kind of surveilance since he got out, it could very likely have been too risky to get to him. And then it hits him… The bright green on the motel rooms wall Juice was raving about.

“Does any of’em sheet wrapped hillbillies use a particular mark apart from their nazi shite?”
“Not tha’ I know of. Why?”
“Cause someone sprayed a tag on Juice’s wall.”
“Wha’ did it look like?”
“Green smiley face.”

Gaines’ eyebrows raise and he looks right at Chibs, neutral gaze and folds his hands.
“Isn’t tha’ Happy Lowman’s little brand?”
Note: This chapter takes place about the same time as Chibs is visiting Gaines in prison.

“Excuse us for the interruption of your day, ma’am. Venus van Dam at your pleasure. And this is Alexander Trager. We have an appointment with father Dawson.”

The soft voice from downstairs is musical and fragile, but Juice still lies in fetal position with the book pressed to his chest. It seems like hours since Chibs’ called, practically ordering him to stay inside and away from windows and wait for Tig. And Venus.

Poor Mrs. Ellis. First a con, then an MC leader and now Tig and a tranny pimp. The only thing lacking is a fucking jester doing cartwheels in a bell hat. Or maybe the Pennywise clown. Juice can’t move. He knows it’s ridiculous, he’s not even afraid, just unable to move it seems. Chibs didn’t give away any details, only that Juice should stay put until the back-up came. And here it is, one half in high heels and big earrings and the other in knife straps and greasy hair.

“I… I’ll see if he’s available. What did you say your names were again?”
"Alexander Trager and Venus van Dam, ma’am. Friends of Filip Telford and Juan Ortiz.”

Only half a lie and Juice swallows to keep the stirring in his chest leashed. He’s not afraid of her, but Tig is another matter entirely. He wont do anything, not here and now, but Juice is very sure the man would still love to chop him into dog food. There’s a moment of footsteps and another door opened and closed, then some snap sounding like the lock of a handbag opening up.

“You look fine.”

Tig grumbles, but it lacks the usual edge and Juice remembers the way he looked and sounded like the first time they met the tranny hooker. Like she was a unicorn – a real one and not the kind Juice had offered to photoshop onto the strapped up guy’s ass.

“A girl’s gotta be sure, Tiger. Can’t embarress you.”
“You’re beautiful, baby. Now put that crap down before they think you’re the Avon lady.”
“Oh, I would’ve been the perfect Avon lady, Aexander Trager.”
“You would’ve, but now’s not the right time for that, hon.”

It’s… bizarre. And suiting, somehow, because it’s fucking Tig and Venus. And also, despite the situation, funny to listen to their bickering. For a minute or so, until Juice remembers why they’re here and that maybe Happy or someone else really is coming after him. Chibs didn’t mention any details about what was going on, he’d sounded strained as if trying to calm down more than just himself or Juice and it just wasn’t the right time to ask questions.

Juice still can’t move. He’s a coward, a rat, a fucking prison bitch and he’s acting like a moron. He is a moron and he’ll just ruin everything again, causing trouble for Chibs, the club, the priest and his neat little housekeeper and all because he’s unable to do anything with others without fucking shit up
in one way or another and bring innocent people down with him in the fall.

Voices. Steps. A knock on the door.

"Juice?"

He nods, because he can’t speak and he’s an idiot. The door opens and there’s padre Mark.

“Juice, your friends are here.”

They’re not his friends. They hate him and have every reason to. Padre Mark sits beside the bed and pats Juice’s arm.

"Filip Telford. You want to call him?"

Juice shakes his head. He already spoke to him. Trusts him. Tig and Venus are supposed to be here, they won’t harm him, but he’s not strong enough to look Tig in the eyes and see himself as the worthless rat, the dirt on the ground he knows he is. He’s not strong enough, but he has to. He takes a deep breath and slowly forces his lead heavy body to sit up.

He closes his eyes again, takes another breath and feels the sickening twist in his stomach. There’s no way around this, he has to take this, not as a man because he’s not even sure he is one anymore, but even a rat can have it’s less pathetic moments, right?

“They’re waiting in the livingroom. Mrs. Ellis is making them tea.”

"Tea?"

Juice knows he looks confused, because the padre smiles.

"Some English habits are hard to break."

“Poor woman…”

“She’s already met two outlaw bikers this week. You don’t think she can handle two more?”

“Call Venus a biker and Tig will punch you. They’re actually in… your livingroom?”

"Don’t worry. Father Timothy is in the library and Mrs. Ellis knows she’s not supposed to call the cops. You trust your friend, right?"

“I trust Chibs. And Venus, I guess. But Tig… He hates me, padre.”

"And yet, here he is. You’re not gonna leave me alone to entertain them, I hope? Not sure how much I have in common with Mr. Trager."

Juice lets out a laugh.

“Trust me, padre, you want to have as little as possible in common with Tig. Just… gimme a minute and I’ll come down, please?"

“Of course.”

Padre Mark actually puts an arm around him in half a hug.

“I can assure you, I never joined any bookclubs in Birmingham either.”

The smile. He knows. Knows enough to know what can be said in other words. Once again, Juice is reminded that this clerk probably has more in common with Chibs than the neat housekeeper who’s probably equally scared and offended by the presence of not one, but three outlaws in her home.
Juice swallows.

“Just… don’t let Tig provoke you, okay? He’s not Chibs, padre. I mean… Chibs is crude and all, but Tig’s the kind of person who’ll go for your neck. Like, literally.”

“Even without his pres’ blessing? Mr. Telford already warned me, Juice. Lets get going before poor Mrs. Ellis has a seizure.”
Chapter 18

The text calms him. Tig and Venus are with Juice and the lead in Chibs’ stomach stops getting heavier. Still there, just not pulling him further down. He’s shaking and sitting on his bike outside prison doesn’t help, but his old carcass isn’t ready to ride yet. Now that he knows his VP is standing guard, his muscles seem to have ceased to function and his head is spinning and ringing like he’s in the aftermath of an explosion he should’ve seen coming. Who’s he trying to fool? He’s not calm.

Chibs looses his breath from his guts fruitless attempt to puke. He already lost his breakfast earlier and there’s nothing left but bile and the cramps. A guard is watching him, but wisely decides not to approach. Throwing up on a parking lot for prison visitors isn’t illegal, after all. Rape is, only not in prison, ironically. What was it Clay said to Juice? *Fifty-fifty chance you wind with no dick up your ass.* Chibs wasn’t there and honestly, he can’t say for sure he wouldn’t have agreed with Clay at the time. Probably been confident there’d be no backlash for Juice. Pretty boys live dangerous in prison.

“Oh, God…”

It turns his stomach and the cramps are back. They’d treated Juice like a hero afterwards, Jax being all worried and, from what Chibs thought at the time, genuinly sorry. Juice had bought them protection almost by getting killed and Chibs also knows it took a little too long for the guys to show up at the baiting to take out the target in time. Juice told him afterwards, with that self-ironic little smile that Chibs thought looked confident, but in his memory it comes off as fearful now.

They used him. Jax, Clay, Gemma. Tully. Chibs knew. He knew Tully more or less had free hands with Juice, the lad told him but it’s not been sinking in yet for some goddamn reason. Not until now. Act bait and take one for the team. Take out the chinks and earn your way back. Take it up the ass until I don’t need you to buy favors from the nazis. But the lies… Juice’s lies and his cowardly swing from a tree, him helping Gemma, trying to cross the border. Running like a pussy… Chibs chokes down a pitiful whimper he’s ashamed of even with only himself witnessing it.

*An’ Juice didn’t snitch…? Not a word, brother. Not while in here an’ he could’ve taken the entire clube down.*

It comes to him in vivid images. The dead look in Juice’s eyes when they first saw each other again after his sentence. The complete and utter exhaustion. He didn’t need the Reaper on his back to paint a picture of death. Juice could’ve told the guards, could’ve re-opened the Rico case, could’ve put Tully down, leak every little secret he still had on the club and erased it. This kind of loyalty isn’t penitence for a betrayal while praying and hoping for forgiveness, it’s erasing your entire self in a silent remorse no one’s reckognizing.

He’s been a selfish, narrow-minded, naïve asshole. Chibs judges other people hard, but himself the hardest and the chain of memories from all the steps on Juice’s downfall is rattling like a the tail of a snake ready to bite. The feverish kisses, the maddening fondling by the lake, Juice’s desperate pleas to not leave him, the lad riding Chibs’ mouth on the couch… The haunted eyes, like he was still on the run but just knew he couldn’t get away or even stay still. Nowhere to run from the past, carrying the guilt and shame in a walk of penitence, at least not going out like a coward or a snitch. Willingly meeting Mr. Mayhem and live, not by lack of courage or determination, but by fucking accident.

Abandoned. Ex-communicated informally. Beaten, isolated, raped, stabbed and forgotten. It’s not Juice who needs forgiveness, it’s Chibs, Jax, Clay and Gemma, but they don’t deserve it. The
harvest of failure has never tasted so bitter, so sour.

Chibs remains sitting, taking the glares on his pathetic figure as a well-earned but so insufficient punishment for the transgressions he wasn’t man enough to look into. He waits for his guts to calm, for his breath to ease, for the spots in front of his eyes go away. As soon as he feels the air going deep enough and the bright spots swim less erratically behind his eyelids, Chibs once again forces his heart to lock down, puts the helmet on and slips into the Samcro pres’ persona, pulling the throttle and rides.
Chapter 19

The lack of warmth is the least surprising. Tig never liked Juice that much to begin with and the man probably already thought of at least twenty slow and painful deaths suitable for a traitor. No, the VP’s cold appearance is expected, but the thoughtful and almost, *almost* sympathetic glance he gives Juice after the call isn’t.

“What’s going on?”

When Tig doesn’t answer immediately, Juice freaks out.

"C’mon, man! Something happened? Chibs alright?"
“Calm the fuck down, Juice. He’s on his way.”
“Alexander...”

Venus’ low chastisement would almost be comical, was it not for the fact that Tig and his lack of answers is scaring the shit out of Juice right now. Padre Mark puts a hand on his shoulder and then looks at Tig.

“Mr. Trager?”
"Just wait for Chibs, father. He didn’t say much and I bet he’s speeding all the way here.”
“Do I need to call the police?”

Tig just gives his *how stupid is it even possible to be* glare and snorts.

“Jesus Christ... Sorry, father. I take most names in vain.”
"Old habits die hard."

By the way Tig’s eyes widens, it’s clear he didn’t expect the priest to be as quick as Chibs with comebacks. The VP rubs his chin.

“Chibs told us to stay put and that’s what we’re gonna do, unless you have a little prayer circle to attend or something.”
“Alexander.”

Venus is probably the only human being able to actually keep Tig in some kind of leash without having a hold on him. *True love*, Juice sardonically thinks and an unvoluntarily shiver leaves him. Isn’t that the greatest hold of all? Padre Mark’s gaze is hardening.

”As a matter of fact, I’m supposed to read mass right now.”

Juice immediately opens his mouth to form an appology, but the priest holds his hand up.

“Father Timothy is covering for me. And I’m quite new in town, so I guess it’s only appropriate that I get to know some of it’s residents.”
“Actually, we’re from Charming.”

Tig, as always ready to throw out nails on the road once a conversation starts rolling a little smoother. It’s his way and Juice knows it, knows that he’s not responsible for the man’s behavior, but it’s still unsettling. Padre Mark doesn’t deserve this. He’s trying to help an ex-con for no other reason than
giving a helping hand and he didn’t ask for an MC shit storm. Juice feels so bad for putting the man in this situation. Not that he could stop Tig from showing up, but still.

Venus takes another sip from the cup and gives padre Mark a warm smile.

“Well, your housekeeper really makes some lovely tea, father.”
“Ah yes please, they look delicious.”

He’s such a lady, the man who knows she’s a woman. The well-manicured hand accepts a jam filled cookie, elegantly as in a commercial, and takes a small bite, shaking the cookie over her tea cup to not get crumbles on the floor. Closed mouth, a little pleased smile and a sip from the cup. The small paper napkin brought up to her lips as she puts the cookie the pries calls biscuit and the her cup down.

“Please give my compliments to your housekeeper, father. This is better than any bakery in the neighborhood.”
“I will. She’ll be happy to hear that, Miss Van Dam.”

Juice wants to scream. It’s too bizarre, the entire situation, and what if Chibs really sent Tig here to keep him under watch until… No! If Chibs hasn’t found it in his big, stupid heart to put Juice down with all the transgressions yet, what’s left to make him send Mr. Mayhem? Juice can’t think of anything, unless whatever errand Chibs went onto, makes him come back with yet another view on his former brother.

The only thing making Juice able to sit and not run away to his bed that’s actually not his, is Venus’ almost hypnotizing voice, soothing like a rippling stream. An endless talking so smooth and musical it doesn’t even appear like the blabber it really is. She’s complimenting the cookies, the curtains and asks as politely about the congregation and how long padre Mark has been in town. She’s leaving both Juice and Tig out of the conversation so tactful, it doesn’t even appear like the intervention it is. There’s not a sign of the madam or hooker as far as the eye can see, just a huge, gracious Lady with capital L and two lethal weapons in the shape of black, costume made high heels.

It feels like an eternity, one Juice is spending sitting almost immovable on the couch, not touching the tea or cookies like he’s frozen on the spot, before the familiar sound of a Dyna outside interrupts the soothing stream of chit-chat. Padre Mark looks up and Juice swallows.

“It’s Chibs.”
He’s the image of composure. Everything in fucking control down to the ends of his shoe laces tucked into the shafts of the boots. A knock on the door he wants to kick in and the woman opening, looking slightly less scared this time by his appearance.

“I need to see Father Mark. *Alone*. I’ll see Juice later, okay?”

The poor woman just nods and hurries away. The priest shows up, looking less than happy.

“What’s going on, Mr. Telford?”

”Gotta get Juice outta here, Father. *Now.*”

“Why? You promised the club wouldn’t…”

”T’is not Samcro, Father. Just… trust me, ye’re all in danger if he stays here. Ye gotta let us take’im with us.”

“No!”

The priest’s eyes are hard as rocks now and they practically pierce into Chibs’.

“Listen, Filip. You’re not coming into this home, dictating it like it’s your club house. If you think I’m gonna let a man with severe PTSD just leave with people who wanted him dead not too long ago, right back to whatever gang war you and your little club is involved with, you’re making a big mistake.”

“Now who’s making threats, Father? Ye’re new in this town, which is a damn good reason why ye should be the one doin’ the listening right now.”

Now the man looks a little less hostile and Chibs sighs.

”Ye need to let’im come with us, unless ye want to be dragged into a very complicated and dangerous situation. Ye’re doin’ no good for either yerself, yer congregation or Juice if ye call the cops and try ‘an make’im stay here now.”

“I promised him a place here.”

“Aye, an’ unless ye want that place blown up, ye should get the lad outta here.”

“Where?”

“Club house. Officially.”

”And unofficially?”

”Ye can’t know. For yer own safety.”

He hauls up a phone.

”Here’s a burner. Ye shouldn’t make calls connected with Juice or me or the club in any way right now from here. Juice’ll call ye as soon as he’s in a safe place.”

“How can I trust you with him?”

“Because I love him.”

“Fuck you.”

There’s almost a smile on the clerks lips and Chibs remembers their conversation at the hospital, his own refusal of admitting the truth this man already saw, now reversed in a mocking image of how deep the denial actually went. Then he nods.
“If he’s willing to, I can’t really stop him, can I?”
“Not really.”
“How ever…”

The man folds his arms together, nailing Chibs’ eyes again.

“You do anything, and I mean anything, Mr. Telford, that’ll harm him in any way for any reason, I swear you’re gonna regret the day you embroidered that little scull patch onto your cut. Are we clear?”

Chibs never shows himself intimidated and this is no exception. He just smiles and pats the preacher’s shoulder.

“Tell me if ye ever consider a trip back to Belfast, Father. True IRA always need good men, ready to fight for wha’s good and just.”
“That’s how you got your smile?”

He likes this man. He doesn’t want to, but this nousy clerk who knows far too much for his own good, is decent and Chibs knows what he’s trying to do with his resistance. He gives the man his genuine smile this time, warm and friendly.

“Ye’re a good man, Father. I know Juice is grateful for all ye’re doin’ for ‘im, as am I, but if ye have any sense, ye just gotta let ‘im come with us before both o’ ye end up in a potentially very bloody shite storm. I know Charming an’ Stockton like the back of my hand, Father, and I tell ye now, that unless ye wan’ yer first time here start with bein’ in the crossfire of bullshite ye had nothin’ to do with an’ very likely havin’ yer own congregation pulled into it, ye’re tellin’ ‘im to come with us. I need to talk to ‘im.”

Control and composure, what’s that? He feels like his scarred cheeks are reddening, the stress catching up on him and he does what he never has to do with people outside the closest core of the club. He begs.

“Jus’ lemme talk to ‘im alone. Please? We gotta get ‘im outta here soon.”

The priest nods.

“Don’t rile him up, Mr. Telford. Be gentle.”
“Aye. Let Venus get to his room an’ get his stuff. An’ we’re gettin’ his stupid kitten too.”
“Chibs?”

Big, brown eyes. Light steps. Why does he have to look so goddamn fragile? Chibs swallows.

“We’re leavin’ now, Juice.”
Chapter 21

The fear. The sense of helplessness, of being tugged and pushed around like a kicked dog or lifeless item, is back. Juice sees Venus coming down the stairs with his pathetic excuse of belongings in the backpack and he knows the priest putting an arm around him, but can’t feel anything. It’s like he’s left his body again, zoned out like he learned in prison, in order to not feel Tully’s weight on his back or the far worse, crushing weight of shame and guilt.

“C’mon, lets go, kiddo.”

Chibs’ voice pulls him out of the numbness, enough for him to move. Padre Mark gives him a hug and, before Juice can react, removes a small silver link with an oval pendant from himself, putting it around Juice’s neck. He makes the sign of the cross on his forehead.

“God bless you, my son. I’ll pray for you.”

Juice can’t speak, he just nods and the gentle man knows what he wants to say, gives his friendly smile and then, Chibs grabs Juice’s arm and they leave through the backdoor, walking fast and there it is, Chibs’ Dyna and the spare helmet Juice numbly puts on before sitting up behind his… what? Friend? Brother? Lover? Scottish confusion? The Reaper?

The sound and vibrations from the engine, the smell of grease, leather and gas. If he had any roots it would’ve felt as if they’d been pulled up again. It’s only when they kick off that Juice realises Chibs isn’t wearing his cut.

He knows he should keep his eyes open, look out for whatever problems that might occur on the road, but he can’t. He’s clutching Chibs’ jacket hard and bends his head down, not leaning onto the man but simply covering his face. A fraction of his mind screams that he might be on his way to meet Mr. Mayhem, that Chibs simply disguised a green mile as a rescue and it doesn’t even scare him. As they’re passing houses and parks and gets out on the highway, Juice finally knows what it is he’s feeling.

Tully. The sharpened plastic, the decision that may not have been an actual choise, but still felt like it was. The slightly surprised and also amused expression in the nazi’s face when he pointed out that Juice had lost the moment of surprise. Just let me finish my pie.

He’d been so tired. Hadn’t even known it until Tully nodded, allowing him to eat the cherry pie in peace, those hazel eyes that didn’t look mocking anymore, not in the least. An acceptance, mutual as fucked up as it seemed, and a sliver of dignity. His choice but not his hands, someone helping him out of the situation he was never supposed to have survived anyway. He’s not the one driving the Dyna, didn’t hold the weapon, but he’s not a puppy or a puppet, because ultimately, he made the choice back then and did it now.

Because he’s already died once and isn’t afraid of doing it again, as long as he’s not left alone. He trusts Chibs without question, right now. The panic that should be exploding inside, are all on lockdown and the lid will be forced off sooner or later, but not now. Not while riding, not with the sound of Tig’s Dyna Street Bob behind him, because that man would never do anything to put Chibs or Venus in danger on the road, meaning he has Juice’s back too right now, no matter his personal feelings.
Juice is trying to keep the fear at bay as they leave the highway for smaller roads, closer to Charming and up to the woods. He involuntarily squeezes Chibs harder by the sight of wilderness closing in, the worry for being tricked again setting in. An execution plan disguised as a rescue mission has been done before and maybe this is his meeting with Mr. Mayhem after all. It’s not panic he’s feeling, but acceptance. Whatever happens, he’ll accept it, as long as he’s not left to face all alone.

He closes his eyes again and this time, he leans his head onto Chibs’ back. He’s so tired and he zones out, only keeping as present as the ride requires. It feels like hours have passed when the smell of wilderness blends with the gasoline and leather, the road gets bumpier, the speed slower and Juice finally realises where they are.
In this life, there really isn’t such a thing as a safe place, but if there was, this is pretty close. Chibs almost hits himself from the thought, because didn’t it’s owner meet his end right here where he was supposed to be safe? The cabin is spotless and Venus is all big eyes and gasps as her platform boots make their muffled sound over the tiles.

“Well, I’ll say that… Darlin’, why didn’t you tell me about this place earlier?”

Tig puts his old lady’s heavy bag down.

“Because my idea of a vaccation isn’t a weekend in the place where Samcro’s former pres shot our senior advisor, baby.”

Venus just nods, not looking the least surprised.

“Who kept it in order?”
“Chucky.”

Chibs he takes his jacket off, throwing it on the old armchair by the open fire.

“Gotta keep’im busy or he’ll get crazy. He comes up here four times a year, just to clean and make sure water and shite is working.”
“He’s not coming up here now, right?”

Juice sounds surprisingly calm, almost too calm, and Chibs shakes his head.

“No. Did the last cleaning two weeks ago, so he wont be back for another three months.”
“He did a good job. Look, there’s a coffe brewer! Anyone up for a cup of the black gold?”

Venus is already going through the small kitchen and Tig sighs.

“I doubt there’s coffee in the pantry, baby.”
“Of course there isn’t. I brought it.”
“When did you have the time to pack that?”
”Alexander, darling, you know I always have my emergency bag packed and ready. You didn’t think I only brought pantyhoses and lingerie, did you?”

Tig exchange a look with Chibs.

“Honestly, I thought it was a ton of make-up and hairspray.”
“What was that, love?”
“Nothing, baby.”
“Good. Make a fire, will you? Juice looks like he could use a little warmth.”

Chibs turns to the creature still standing in the doorway with arms crossed and a hesitant although not terribly frightened look on his face. He’s getting better at hiding it, it seems. The weight in Chibs’
stomach is still there and it’s one he can’t throw up. Juice knows that he knows something but Chibs just doesn’t trust his own voice, heart or mind to speak of it now. At least the kid – why can’t he stop calling a grown man kid?! – is in a way more safe place now and T.O. is keeping a very unofficial watch on the priest’s house. Chibs might have deliberately forgotten to mention that to the man, but time was of the essence.

“Ye’re just gonnae stand there, lad?”

Juice shrugs and sits down on one of the chairs by the table. His eyes are tired, reminding too much of the dead look Chibs saw on their first meeting after his sentence. Does he think…? No, he must know now that… Must he? Chibs hasn’t really had time to think of it the last hour. Haste was a priority and explanations had to wait. What if Juice had refused? What does he think will happen? Chibs walks over to him and the small twitch in the thin body tells him that Juice maybe doesn’t know.

“Juicyboy…”

He doesn’t care that Tig and Venus, although having taken to the tiny kitchen, can hear him. He comes close, putting a hand on the black hair and Juice shivers, not only from the cold.

“Juice…”
“Just tell me, Chibs.”

The still somehow puppylike face, only with old eyes, turns up and there’s a shade of steel in the gaze, an internal fight for dignity. Juice is fearing, not for his life maybe, but for pain. For being rejected, put down like an animal and once again left to die alone. Right now, Chibs can’t tell him what he knows, but Gaines’ words are ringing in his ears, painting horrifying pictures before his eyes and he knows he has a grim look on his scarred face that doesn’t help in the least. He lowers himself to come down in level with Juice’s face and just pulls him into a hug.

The body is tense as hell, but doesn’t resist and Chibs buries his mouth in the crook of the neck.

“I’ll tell ye everythin’, mo chridhe*... We’re gonnae have a talk later, but right now, I just need ye to trust me. Nothin’s gonnae happen to ye, lovey. Tig an’ Venus wont hurt ye. I wont hurt ye.”

There’s a small relaxation, just enough to tell him the lad at least trust him on that one. Chibs sighs.

“I’ll have to leave soon.”
“What?”

Tension back in a instance and Juice breaks the embrace, almost pushing Chibs away and the hollow eyes are suddenly dark with anger.

“Juicyboy…”
“Don’t. Just… don’t call me that.”

Juice stands and walks away from him, towards the door, and Chibs panics.

“Ye’re not goin’ anywhere, Juice!”
“No? You’re gonna shoot me in the legs, or what?”
“Stop it.”
He’s having his threatening voice now, but Juice doesn’t seem the least scared anymore and when Chibs walks over and grabs his wrist, the kid simply wrests his hand way harder than his weak frame would suggest he’s able to right now, and gets loose. Quick as a enraged animal, Juice attacks and slams his fist right into Chibs’ temple, hand sharp and bony from malnutrition and knuckles perpetually sore from more fights than any of them can count.

Chibs’ vision gets blurred and he stumbles, grabbing the table for support because holy Christ, the lad still throws a punch like a goddamn Irish street fighter.

“Don’t fucking move!”

Tig, fast as ever, and the sound of his gun unloading. Chibs waves his hand.

“Put that thing away, for Christ’s sake, an’ leave us alone.”

“Are you…”

“Now!”

Juice is frozen on spot as Tig and Venus walks out and Chibs slumps over to the fireplace, sinking down on the old rug in front of it. Tig never made the fire, only put the woods there and Chibs takes his lighter out and crinkles some of the old newspapers next to the pile of woods to get the fire going quicker. His hands are shaking, his ears ringing and the lighter wont obey him.

“Ye have a lighter?”

Juice doesn’t answer, but walks over, not all the way but close enough to throw his lighter effectively and Chibs picks it up. The fire gets help from the old newspaper and Chibs watches how adverts for cars, wedding announcements and death notices feed the flames and he sits down on the rug.

“Sit.”

No sound of steps and Chibs sighs.

“Please?”

Steps now, but towards the kitchen and the sound of a freezer door, of a case being opened. Familiar cracking and a moment later, Juice is back, handing him a bag of ice. Chucky deserves a pay raise for keeping this place in order. And Chibs deserved that punch and more. He hauls up a fag, offering Juice one as well and the kid lights them before sitting down beside him, with as much space between them as possible without getting too far off the warmth.

“I met with Gaines.”

“Gaines?”

Juice sounds confused and Chibs pulls some well-needed nicotine down his lungs.

“Indian Hills’ pres.”

“Oh.”

Neutral reckognition.

”He told me. ’Bout Tully.”
Chibs can’t look at him yet, just can’t, but he can almost hear how Juice’s heart is speeding up, how he’s squeezing the fag between his fingers and how his entire body is closing down, like a hedgehog in passive defense.

“You dragged me out in the woods to talk about Ron Tully?”

The voice. Small and strained, filled with clenched fists and swallowed cries. Had he not punched Chibs already, he very well might have now. Instead he gives a joyless, self-loathing laugh.

”You went to Stockton, didn’t you?”

“Aye.”

Juice hums and nods.

“I get it. A little easier to believe someone who’s not a rat. Can’t blame you, can I?”

”Juicy…”

”I understand, Chibs.”

Juice laughs again and the sound is broken, hollow.

”Jesus… Didn’t see this one coming. Nazis haunting me from fucking grave.”

”Tully…”

”Shut up!”

His face is white now, pupils wide blown and he stumps the fag out.

”You have no fucking right to talk to me about him. Got your confirmation now, Chibs. Congratulations. Now that you know for sure I was his bitch, what’s next?”

”Jax…”

”Yes, your golden boy sold me out! Didn’t think I knew that, huh? Anyway, a rat and fucking coward doesn’t really deserve better than some nazi dick up the ass and a green light under the table. Guess the white hicks are disappointed.”

Chibs knows he must look surprised because Juice frowns and snorts.

”Of course you thought I’m too stupid to put shit together, Chibs. That’s what all of you thought… Unless you brought me out here to kill me, there’s not many options left, are there? Sure, maybe Happy or someone else wants to put a bullet in my head but they wouldn’t do it without a vote… That leaves either some distant family members to the Triads or fucktard nazis who didn’t appriciate that Tully fucked an In-Betweener who lived to tell the tale.”

The kid talks fast, tears brimming although not yet falling and maybe he’s not even aware of them. His secret spilled out, so much pain shining through the hard voice, bleeding through every word and it breaks Chibs to hear it. Juice looks completely numb when he finally looks at him.

”He was fond of me. Or at least my Puerto Rican ass. Wasn’t as good aiming the knife as his cock, though, but rather him than the three chinks and some spit. Ever had Brontë’s love poems read to you by a nazi in protective custody? Romantic as hell…”

Chapter End Notes
*my heart
Chapter 23

A lifetime ago, Chibs punched him up and down the garage and then patched him together afterwards. Juice isn’t as skilled as the old army medic but he knows enough and he’s careful, cleaning the rather large but shallow wound his knuckles left on the temple. The bruise will be bigger and a part of Juice is regretful for hurting the man, but there’s a strange sense of calm, of perhaps not rightful but at least satisfying payback for the intrusion into some of his most painful memories.

The sound of the fire is soothing, so are the gulps of cheap scotch from the bottle wandering between them. Chibs is sitting on the floor, Juice on the armchair with a lamp close to get a better sight. Chibs has the head resting on Juice’s thigh and hisses when the rag with soap meets the wound and Juice cleans the invisible dirt off a little rougher than he intended to, before putting a plaster on it.

He’s careful not to catch any of the hair in it and when he’s done, he reaches for another smoke from Chibs’ pocket and the man takes one himself, handing over the lighter.

“Juice…”
“T’m fucking exhausted.”
“Should get some sleep, then.”

Chibs’ voice is very soft. Meak, almost, and it doesn’t suit him. Or it’s simply just unusual. For what it’s worth, Juice knows the man won’t ask anything else. Not about this. Not tonight. The sore head leans back onto his thigh and it’s as surprising as it’s weird. Reversed roles somehow and without really thinking about it, Juice starts petting the dark brown, greyish hair.

“What about you?”
“Me?”
“Said earlier you were gonna leave…”
“Only for an errand.”
“Yeah? Like what?”

When there’s no immediate answer, Juice wants to start screaming at him again, but he’s just too tired and touching the man’s hair is somehow calming. Chibs sighs.

“Nothin’ tha’ can’t wait, I guess.”

He sounds tired too. A little resigned. Tig and Venus still aren’t back from whatever errend they went on – a fucking moonlight stroll in the woods? – and as far as Juice is concerned, they could stay away a while longer. Or at least outside. He keeps touching Chibs’ hair like he once did Tully’s and it should sicken him, but the worst has already been spoken and the memory, although painful, doesn’t stir shit up right now. And Tully’s hair was dyed black, not grey almost snowish roots slowly taking over the dark drown.

“Brought yer meds?”
“Yeah, unless Venus missed them.”
“Doubt that. Need any of’em before bed?”
“Probably.”

Unless he wants to spend the night twisting, turning and having nightmares. Juice isn’t really sure how this cabin was decorated earlier, but he seriously doubts the queen sized bed squeezed into the
other room was Piney’s.

“All right, Tig and Venus taking the bed?”
“Not both. S’another one in here ye pull out. ’Bout the same size.”
“You’re sleepin’ with me, then?”
“Aye. Could always ban me to the couch otherwise, I guess. I mean…”
“Don’t start again, Chibs. Really, I’m gonna have a fucking seizure…”
”Try to avoid tha’, kiddo. ’S a little more complicated to patch up.”

The understatements, the dry voice with the accent. Juice almost laughs, at least he thinks he does, but there are only tears and Chibs is out of his usual brisk but comforting words. He seems unable to do anything other than simply hold him and really, that’s all he can do, all Juice really wants him to do and had needed him to do after patching him up that one time in the garage.

“Sure ye’re okay with me sleepin’ in the same bed?”
“You’re not fucking chickening out on me now, old man.”

These swift turns in his head will leave him fucking schizofrenic one day. That is, if there’s anything left to actually fuck up more. Juice seriously doubts there is.
Chapter 24

Son. Shine. You are my son shine… My only sunshine. Chibs strokes a finger over the fabric, covering the skin where the skulls and boxes with words used to be. It’s all gone now, every little stain of ink revealing his past and the ones that aren’t, the ridiculous head tribals, are covered with that thick, black hair. Juice is no son anymore and it was a long time since there was any sunshine on his sky.

The man he still can’t help but call kid, lad, boy, is laying on his arm, back pressed onto Chibs’ chest and it feels far more natural than it probably should. Chibs pets him slowly, listening to his breaths and the wind blowing outside.

It makes more sense now, all the erratic shite in Juice’s behavior. Horrifyingly so, but better the devil you know, right? Right…? Chibs hates fumbling in darkness and now as he’s been enlightened, all there seems to be is a far worse darkness than ever. The pieces finally being put together makes an awful, terrifying image of an insane sacrifice covered up by a mask of sanity and composure. I just need ye to trust me… Chibs shivers and pulls Juice closer, kissing his neck because he just has to. Has to feel the warmth there, where the bruising mark from the rope is long since gone.

The cover is thin and the extra blanket keeps Juice warm, along with Chibs’ body. The man in his arms practically squirmed against him before sleep came, rubbing warmth on his thin back and Chibs can’t help but wonder how many nights his stupid sunshine froze under the covers. Or was warmed by someone who shouldn’t have been there… Why should Juice trust anyone ever again? Least of all a former brother.

Juice’s skin is surprisingly well healed. The Aryans’ tattoo artist did one hell of a good job. How did they even get it done inside? Blackening, cutting or burning are risky enough considering it’s punishable to make ink in prison. Smuggling all the tools in for this work must’ve cost a fortune for the bribing alone and then there’s the time, the risk of being caught, paying guards to look the other way… There are scars left, but not big enough to be spotted unless you come close. It’s not something to be done for a rat punk and Chibs isn’t sure he wants to know what this visible sign of care for Juice’s skin actually means, considering who’s behind it. Not that it would’ve been better to look at a mess of scars from knives and fire, or a formless ink blotch, but it raises questions only Juice can answer and he may or may not be interested in sharing those answers.

Most men of Chibs’ age, living this kind of life, walk around confident that their long years of building up a badass surface won’t crack. Not even their closest, the ones they trust as much as violent criminals deep down the pit of gangs, cartels, rivalry and underground businesses are capable of, usually aren’t allowed that far inside your heart and mind. It’s partly for protecting your freedom, your loved ones and your money from being taken away, but the roots of this shielding go deeper than that.

Juice moves a little, mumbles in his sleep and Chibs plants a kiss on his hair, strokes his chest in slow circles and the man is stilled, perhaps escaping another nightmare before it can take over and ruin the much needed rest. From the world, from himself, from whatever persona he’s forced to wear.

The I love you:s have always been sprinkled so easily in Samcro. Perhaps too easily, making the words diluted and meaningless when you don’t know who’s sincere anymore. Son. Shine. You are my son shine… My only sunshine. You’ll never know, dear, how much I love you… Juice never knew, neither did Chibs. The other truths spilled out, first from Gaines and then Juice, are anything
but easy to digest. *He could do with a little loving*… If there’s any justice, any God caring in the least, Jax Teller and Ron Tully are screaming in purgatory now. Condemning people to hell is one of the things Chibs’ Catholic superstitions won’t allow him to do. He already has enough sins on his conscience as it is, most of them being things he’s not regretting that much or at all, and adding that level of haughtiness to the list, simply feels morally wrong. He’s not a sociopath, after all, he knows how to love until it hurts.

Years of practice, in Glasgow’s rough neighborhood, in the percipent house with his parents and school, then the army, IRA, the Sons and stints in prison, have perfected the skill to cry in silence. His head, still hurting from the brutal punch, hates him for it, because it will just make it worse, but at least he’s not disturbing Juice.

The sound of steps outside has him tense a little, before he hear the musical voice and soft knocking.

“Filip? Everything alright?”

Juice doesn’t wake up and the door opens just enough for the man who knows she’s a woman to see them. She’s wearing one of her silk kimonos and has a small lamp in her hand. Chibs squints at her, too fucking frayed to have the time to hide the tears.

“Everythin’s fine, Venus. He’s asleep.”
“Good. Wake me up if you need anything, alright?”
“Aye. Thanks.”
“Goodnight then, love.”
“Goodnight, darling.”

She inspires pet names naturally, Tig’s old lady. She closes the door and Chibs buries his face in Juice’s hair again. It’s nothing but a bloody miracle that the man in his arms is still breathing, still letting anyone near, still forgiving… Chibs is no fucking psychiatrist, just an old bastard who’s seen and done too much shit most people never experience, but of all the sacrifices he can come up with, the Reaper’s patch has cost him throughout the years, nothing comes close to this.

How little do you have to think of yourself to take on that burden, knowing you most likely never will be rewarded for it? Men far stronger, far more cunning and committing worse treason against the patch than Juice, have planned and carried out retaliation against the club, collaborated with cops and other gangs to escape the green light and get payback, even when they were the rats and cowards. Juice isn’t evil, he’s stupid and easily manipulated, too fucking… nice to carry the patch to begin with. His personal record is, just like Half-Sack’s, filled with petty crimes. Computor frauds, theft, burglary, dealing and shite like that. Most of the sons already have violent crimes on their records when they’re patched in, because really that’s the kind of men they’ve always recruited.

It’s not about Juice being anymore good or lawful, because he definitely isn’t, but there’s never been this deep-rooted prone for violence or outright cruelty in him. In a sense, he’s not that much different from Chibs or Bobby, preferring to seek other ways before taking to violence. The difference lies more in the lack of confidence, really. Inner strength was never Juice’s trademark and without a violent temper to cover it up, it’s been fairly easy for Jax, Gemma and Clay to manipulate him.

Chibs can’t recall another human being he’s felt this need to simply hold before. The darkness, Juice’s meds, the secluded room… An illusion of safety allowing a side of Chibs he didn’t even know he had to come forth. There’s no way of telling how tomorrow will be and Chibs hates that kind of unpredictability, because it has to do with shite neither of them can control. Just trying to take in the horrors Juice has been through the last three years is too much. The truths are like multiple
bullet holes into a fucking rowboat you have no chance to fix in time. All there is, is to abandon the wreck and swim for shore, watching it sink.

For Chibs, it’s like seeing his sacrifices and loyalty disappear in the water with a shrug, like they mean nothing to anyone and never did, soon to be forgotten once the Reaper has harvested what’s his. In the end, the Reaper gets it all, the sunshine too.
Juice wakes up screaming and thrashing and from the other side of the door, more loud noises are ruining any chance for a peaceful wake-up.

“Don’t let her out!”
"Stop yelling! Come here… Fuck!”

Chibs fumbles to turn the light on, far from rested, and Juice’s scream is hollow and bright, mixing up with Tig’s and Venus’ voices and Mina’s barking. He feels wild, confused and he almost smashes an elbow in Chibs’ already bruised face.

“Juice, stop! Ye’re alright, laddie, c’mere.”
"Where am I?!!"
"Piney’s old cabin, we came up here last night. Ye remember?"
“Cabin?”

Juice honestly isn’t nearly enough back in reality to know. All he’s sure of right now, as the mists of sleep is still clouding him, is that Tully isn’t there, neither is Jax, and that he can hear loud noises of people, a dog and… and…? He leaves the bed, quickly putting his pants and t-shirt back on and opens the door. The next second, something yellowred is shooting through it like an arrow, followed by a big dog, and right onto…

“Jaysus Christ!?"

The Scot who’s anything but an early riser, is suddenly attacked by two animals, one of which literally clutching his head and the other jumping up on his chest, followed by a tranny in a silky, flowing robe.

“Mina, come back here! Alexander, get the leash!”
“Take this bloody thing off me!”

It’s only now, that Juice realises what’s attacking Chibs.

“Dyna! Stay still, Chibs, don’t hurt her!”
"Just take her off me, ye idiot! Mary, Mother of Christ, ye’re tryin’ to murder me in my sleep?!"

Juice, too happy and stunned to care about Chibs’ barks, moves to come between the dog and the scared kitten and once Venus has put the leash onto the over-enthusiastic dog, Juice is able to slowly and carefully make the quivering little furball let go of Chibs’ temples and beard. He holds her firmly in his hands and presses her to his chest as hard as he can without hurting her.

“C’mere, Dyna. S’alright, baby girl… S’alright…”

Whatever nightmare he had, it’s gone and forgotten now and Juice just marvels in having his stray kitten back, not caring the least about the scratches left on him – or Chibs. The Scot grumbles and leaves the bed in a rush, angrily pulling his jeans and shirt on, searching through his pockets for his cigarettes.

“You got kicked out of bed, Chibs? Replaced by a cat…”
Tig is leaning in the doorway, a teasing smile on his face and Chibs just glares.

“Move.”

The VP steps away and Chibs heads out, slamming the door behind him. Tig shrugs.

“Scots… Sensitive little fuckers. It’s the right cat?”
"How did you…?"
"Relax, idiot. No one died. And don’t thank me, you owe me fifty bucks.”
"Fifty bucks?!"

Tig smirks.

"Now the poor middleclass girl can get herself another pet. Or a teddy or a piñata. Less food costs since she didn’t seem to afford kibble. Wanted to make sure her nasty little parents wouldn't cause trouble.”

Juice’s little spell of awe is broken and he takes a closer look at his kitten and her meager body.

“God… What have they done to you, girl…?”

The tiny mewls, headbuffs, purrs and vibrating little tail is answer enough. Dyna is a very happy kitten right now, being back with Juice and her daddy is just as happy, only he’s crying too and doesn’t want Tig to see it. Thankfully, the man leaves him alone with the furball and Juice lays down again with Dyna snuggled like a soft little engine onto his chest.

By heart, Juice is still an outlaw and right now he feels zero sympathy towards the girl who got his little friend as a birthday gift. Dyna is scrawny and her fur is matted, signs of neglect that can’t be excused.

“Should’ve kicked her ass, baby girl. Fucking evil little brat…”

He pets her carefully, nuzzling her tiny head and puts a finger in her paw to feel the little clench around it from the pads as she reclams her daddy, marking her territory with rough tongue and sharp teeth all over Juice’s face, literally licking the tears away and it’s sappy, stupid and fucking embarrasssing – or should be – but what’s new about that? For the moment, Juice is relieved that Chibs has left the room.

“Happy to see me, girl? Yeah, me too… Missed you so much, my little mountain lion… Thought I’d never see you again…”

This isn’t a kitty taken from a loving home, but rescued from being a toy among others, easily thrown away by a spoiled child once something more interesting gets her attention. For a long time Juice just lays there, giving Dyna his full attention, cuddles and kisses, not thinking about anything else, especially not the erratic turns in his mind.
“It’s the principle, Chibs.”
"Principle?"
"You don’t just take someone else’s pet."

Chibs just grunts and lights a smoke. It’s way too fucking early for him to be awake, but the morning air up here in the woods isn’t bad. No sounds from the town, less need for lying and pretending. Some fucking peace and quiet. Well, in some ways, at least.

“Is it always like that?”
“Like what?”
"Nightmares and screaming."
"Mostly."
"How long?"
"Don’t know, really. Since Stockton, I guess."

Which could mean anything from a couple of months outside to almost three years since stepping inside. Tig hums. It’s not as if the VP can’t imagine, but more likely can imagine far too well and Chibs doesn’t need to know just how much. His own imagination and experience is more than enough.

“Ye must think I’m fuckin’ out of my mind…”
“Completely. I like it, pres.”

Tig gives his teasing grin and blows some smoke in Chibs’ face.

“You’ve been going walking around all high and mighty with your fucking reason for years now, brother. Was about time you be taken down a knot or two.”
“Fuck ye, Tig.”

He sighs, rubbing a hand over his face.

“This is gonnae be one hell of a shite storm…”
“Good.”
“Good?”
“In our age, brother, we only get fatter by the minute if we stay too still.”
“Speak for yerself, arsehole, I’ve lost some.”

Tig laughs, shaking his head.

”You ever ask yourself what we did for the club and what we did solely for Jax, Gemma or Clay?”
“All the time.”
“And what’s the answer?”

Chibs sighs again, deeply and runs his free hand through his pretty greasy hair.

“Ask me in a day or two, ‘cause right now I’m still tryin’ to keep my shite together. And his… Thanks, by the way. For getting’ the bloody cat.”
“You’re welcome. Didn’t know you cared.”
Chibs just glares at him.

"When’s the meeting?"
"Not before noon. Venus stays here with him."
"Aye, I’m sure she does. Just not as sure he will…"
"Threaten to take the cat back."
"Sure, because another panic attack should to the trick… Jesus Christ… The hell am I doin’…”
"You’re in love, pres, that’s what you’re doing."

It sounds too easy, sloppish even, hearing it said like that. Like it’s no big deal. Nothing even remotely strange about it at all, neither Juice’s status as a an ex-communicated rat or Chibs’ sudden anything but brotherly feelings for him. Like the world isn’t shaking under his feet from the tremors of feelings he didn’t even know he could have for another person, let alone a man and especially not towards Juice.

It scares Chibs that he didn’t need the confirmation from Gaines, not really, because he already somehow lost the battle with that first frightened, lost and hopelessly bright smile outside the motel. Is he crazy or just discovering shite he didn’t have a chance or reason to look closer at before? It’s not that he’s never had complicated or even straight out fucked up relationships before. There’s a reason he’s never had a steady lass since Fiona and up until now it’s been a lot about simple convenience – or at least that’s what Chibs has thought.

The less people tangled up with you, the less vulnerable you, and in the end, the club and your brothers are. And the less grief when you loose them. Simple and logical, but not even Chibs thinks it works that easy. He loves Juice, he’s in love with him, and that’s been his normal state of mind for years. So normal, he’s been able to ignore it, shove it away and refuse to look at it in any light that will show it’s true colors. Utterly, stupidly in fucking love and with every reason in the world to choke it.

He can hear from inside how Venus is making breakfast, the smell of flap jacks and coffee coming from the door and how she’s talking to Mina. What he can’t hear is Juice snuggling with the kitten, but he doesn’t need to hear it to know. Chibs knows that Juice is smiling now, nuzzling the creature and letting her knead on him on the covers. That he has that stupid grin on his face and pets the fur, momentarily forgetting about the truths he shared with Chibs last night, the chaos that is his life and all the shite in his past that no one, especially not Chibs, can erase.

Tig stumps his fag out and throws an amused look at the window from where Venus’ flourishing voice can be heard as she talks to Mina and turns flap jacks, walking around in her satin kimono. The aging, stone cold face turns soft, the usually so neutral gaze warm and almost young. It’s filled with nothing but completely fucking adoration and that stunned surprise shouting wordlessly I can’t believe this amazing creature is mine, holy shit, is this real?!

It’s not the look of a man who’s conquered someone or the sated, too content gaze from a husband so entirely sure of his status he no longer thinks he needs to win his wife’s heart. Tig is pushing sixty and as long as Chibs has known him, he’s never looked this… young. This alive. Juice looked more dead than alive when Chibs saw him again, but the smile still punched him right in the guts, hit where it hurt the most, that last unprotected space where his old, stupid heart made a jump, shouting he’s alive, ye idiot! Ye see’im, numpty, t’is him, ye’ve got another chance, ye old bastard… Fuck the Reaper, ye’ve got another chance…
Chapter 27

She’s been playing for a while. Shoving her little face into the blanket, chasing Juice’s hands and feet, purring and drooling all over him before finally curling into a little ball onto his chest. Juice knows his smile is stupid, but the little kitten simply plasters it on him, erasing the shitty wake-up as well as the tears.

It wasn’t the usual nightmare this time. In this, he’d been alone in the woods, not prison. The soft purrs from Dyna keep him from falling asleep again, making him able to think about the dream without risking a dive back into it again. It’s a nasty one, where he’s running around the trees in the darkness and there are voices calling at him from the trees. Chibs’, Jax’s... and Tully’s. No faces, just voices echoing and in the end, the one Juice had run into, was the voiceless Reaper, holding a rope instead of the scythe. He shudders from the memory, suddenly all cold despite the rather thick blanket and the living, warmblooded furball.

Chibs comes back, not angrily with frustrated steps, but his usual rather light padding. His hair is ragged, the shirt only half-buttoned and he smells from tobacco and warmth. The glare at the kitten is a little grumpy but he closes the door softly and walks over to the bed, laying down again. The pepper dark eyes look tired, but the anger from the abrupt pet invasion is gone and he nods at the occupied space.

“Is there room for one more, or is the royal fur highness too high and mighty to share?”

Juice smiles and moves further away to “his” side, with Dyna promptly tucked in the space between his shoulder and chin. Chibs removes his shirt but keeps the wifebeater and jeans and lays down carefully not to startle the kitten. There are tiny markings from claws on his temples and the skin just below his ears and Juice makes a grimaze.

“Sorry ’bout my mountain lion.”

Chibs just grunts. He adjusts his pillow and turns to face Juice, pulling the blanket over them both. He’s not laying on the sore side and Juice strokes away the strand of hair falling over the man’s bruised face, tucking it behind his ear.

“Sorry ’bout that too. Did... did I smash you again now?”

”Nah, ye missed this time.”

”Had a nightmare.”

”I could tell. Pretty bad one, huh?”

”Yeah…”

Chibs doesn’t say anything, just keeps looking at him, almost like he did when Juice told him about his father. Soft, non-judging and just patiently waiting for the entire truth to be told. He puts an arm around Juice’s back, just holding it there without pulling him closer, leaving room for the still loudly purring kitten. Juice swallows.

“Don’t know what you’re thinking of me right now. After last night…”

“Hey… Don’ rile yerself up again, kiddo.”

Juice hasn’t even realised how his breathing and pulse were speeding up and Chibs manages to get his other arm under Juice’s head with only a little surprise purr from Dyna, who soon finds the
nestled place between two human chests an acceptable change. Chibs’ hand is slowly circling over Juice’s back, stopping the stress from blossoming out again.

It’s a protective touch, almost as if Chibs is trying to act like a shield. Against the nightmares, their shared club history, Juice’s time in Stockton or maybe even Chibs’ own past along with the very uncertain future.

“It’s so sorry, Juice. So sorry…”
“Me too.”

Whispers in the morning light. Nine little words, years of small and large, shallow and deep wounds, some of them shared, mostly hidden and well enough patched up to keep going, but never fully healed. Two pair of brown eyes, two men who have no words for a situation like this, because it was never a possibility in the kind of life they’ve lived this far, neither the parts chosen nor the ones forced or just accidently happening.

In the chaos of shootings, explosions, business, frauds, family secrets, lies, crow eaters, wives and kids, drugs, money and burning wheels on the highway, this just wasn’t an option. Laying in the arms of another man, just feeling the warmth from his body without any hard, shoulder slamming hugs or chaste kisses on the forehead to make it acceptable. Chibs isn’t ripped but soft. The wrinkles and bulk, grey hairs and aging skin aren’t turn-offs or even something to just accept, but beautiful. The lines and years tell a history, one of blood and violence, but also of commitment and love, patience and loyalty. That level of passion and freedom comes with a price tag few people are ready to pay or could even imagine.

Yes, Chibs is a beautiful man, not despite all of that, but because of it. The heat and closeness from his body evens out Juice’s breathing again and he bends down the head to kiss the serious man’s perpetual smile. It’s tentative and tense at first and Juice fears he’s stepped over a line he didn’t know was redrawn but then the Scot sighs and adjusts to get a better angle.

The kiss isn’t feverish or scared, just slow, maddening slow and fucking deep, tasting from sleep, tobacco and weariness. It’s relieved, exhausted and easy as breathing, causing Juice’s skin to feel too tight, widening his flesh and bones too much, the blood floating faster and it’s choking him. He breaks the kiss, panting, but doesn’t pull himself away from Chibs’ arms. He wants to stay there, the fear of being pushed away, either by humans or his own demons and once again get lost constantly present. His scrawny, hurt body is screaming about limits, of violently wiped out boundaries Jax gave other men permission to cross because what did it matter. The Reaper would have his harvest in the end, always starving for more, never fattening in content under the cloak. Just a giant skeleton swallowing the sacrifices, one after another, and he’s not a fussy eater. The more wounds, the more visible signs of the sacrifice, the better.

The man now kissing his head isn’t the Reaper, he’s living flesh and blood, a beating heart and soothing murmur in his hair. He’s close, but doesn’t force himself onto him, hungry but not a starving and greedy animal, blind and deaf for anything but his own hunger. Such a stark contrast, being held like this, like he’s dear to someone, something to be gentle with, not just due to physical wounds and weakness, but for those who can’t be seen as well. For just the sake of this man’s longing for him, despite whatever hands have been onto his pathetic piece of trash for a body before.

That’s how Chibs is holding, kissing and caressing him, accepting the small physical distance. Like he’s been longing for him for such a long time the breaking of these boundaries and the acceptance for limits both come natural and easy and the changed state of his body isn’t offputting or judged. Juice makes a small, involuntary sound and Chibs immediately lets go, scating over his face with
questioning, alert gaze that wants to see, to know where the limits are.

“Ye okay?”

Callous hands with all the little nicks and scars, used to both give and take pain, so very used to squeeze hard in order to keep control of body and mind. They’ll never be soft like a woman’s and Juice not only is fine with that, he wouldn’t want them to be any different. He’s not gay, this is not him coming out of a closet, at least it doesn’t feel like it. He likes women, or used to, a long time ago. Honestly, Juice can’t remember feeling anything even close to this for a woman, nor another man. Whatever labels possible to slam onto it, they all seem inadequate. Passable, but not quite right.

”Wha’s goin’ on in tha’ head o’ yers, muppet…? Can hear ye thinkin’…”

“Well… ‘S a bit of a mess up there…”

They both smile at that, the minefield that is Juice’s fucked up brain and Chibs traces his spine under his fingers, slowly stroking the too visible fetlocks up and down in a feather light touch. Juice hums from it, keeps smiling as he leans onto the other man’s chest, savouring the moment of stillness.

“Thank ye.”

It’s a whisper against his skin, thick and hoarse, grey like the dawn before sunrise, like the color shifting of the man’s hair. Unobtrusive, an almost shy confession of something longtime hidden, possibly forgotten or maybe never really discovered until now. Weary, fragile and stiff from lack of use, from being tucked away in a narrow space for too long. And just like the man himself, so very beautiful.
Chapter 28

The crisp morning and Venus’ neatly set breakfast table make the kid look even worse. Hollow, colorless cheeks, dark circles under his eyes and once again that self-ironic, joyless smile. A shield, easy to look through if you know him, but still visible, an automatic attempt to pretend the weakness isn’t there.

“There you go, darling. Venus’ flapjacks are served!”
“Thanks.”

Juice’s smile is just as depressing as before but Venus, the amazing creature she is, knows how to handle that kind of hiding like a pro. She simply kisses the kid’s head and pets the kitten who refuses to leave Juice’s lap. Mina looks at it from her spot beside Tig and the man scratches her head.

“It’s just a kitten, girl. She won’t steal your food.”
“Or our love.”

Venus bends down to pet the dog, complimenting her in that utterly ridiculous way you just do with pets. And kids, if you’re good with them. Chibs isn’t, at least not enough to make a good father on his own. Not that he really had the chance, but still. Kerrianne was better off with her mom.

As Tig and Chibs dig into the breakfast, Juice is only taking small bits of the flapjack on his plate, chewing each of them for too long and the tension is back again. Shoulders pulled up, upper arms pressed to the torso. Any sign of the warm and soft man in Chibs’ arms this morning is gone. In his place there’s a stressed out, stiff and emotionally exhausted creature with non-existing appetite and empty gaze. The most alive looking thing is the kitten, kneading his lap and Juice’s hand is trembling a little.

“Juicy.”

Chibs keeps his voice low and soft, but the kid still twitches, eyes a bit glassy.

“Yeah?”
“Ye took yer meds?”
”Uhm… No, not yet.”

Planned on taking them, at least. Maybe. He blinks a few times.

“They’re in my bag somewhere. I’ll get them later.”
“I’ll get’em for ye.”

Chibs raises from the table and hurries away to “their” room, before Juice can protest and Venus’ musical voice is sounding through the cabin.

“They’re in the backpack, Filip!”

Juice’s few possessions are mostly cheap clothes, some toiletries and some kind of fantasy book given to him from the priest. Chibs finds the meds pretty quickly and takes out the right dose. He’s just about to close the backpack again when he feels something hard on the bottom. He knows he shouldn’t, but Chibs can’t stop himself. He searches through the layers of clothes and wrapped in an
old, partly broken pillow-case, there’s a book.

*Love Poems* by Emily Brontë. It’s an old, or at least well-used copy with cheap paper cover and Chibs can hardly breathe when he opens it and sees the squiggly written name on top of the first page. *Ron Tully.*

Chibs swallows, hit by too many emotions to express right now. He’s never met Ron Tully, not in person, and the little he knows about the man who Jax more or less sold Juice to, is already more than he wanted to know. *Ever had Brontë’s love poems read to you by a nazi in protective custody? Romantic as hell…* He wants to burn it. Touching it makes him sick and Chibs quickly wraps the pillow-case he now recalls as the same kind used at Stockton around it and puts it back as careful as possible. He closes the backpack and goes back to the kitchen, putting the pills next to Juice’s plate.

“Think this is all for now.”

”Thanks.”

Juice doesn’t question him, count the pills or even look at them to see it’s the right sort and dose. He simply takes them, one by one, and swallows with sips of the orange juice Venus has served him. Chibs can’t help but put a hand very lightly on the man’s wrist, the one that is still moving to pet the kitten.

Suspicious as he was in the beginning, Chibs feels bad for depriving Juice of the one human contact treating him with kindness, even if it’s out of necessity to keep both the lad and the priest safe. Partly covered by the oversized hoodie, rests the small silver link over too prominent collar bones. Juice must’ve removed it before they went to sleep and put it back on while dressing. Just as the sunlit breakfast table, the clean and simply beauty of it, only seems to cement the pitiful state of the man wearing it.

Juice is picking at his food, mostly just pushing it around the plate and it honestly looks like he’s not even aware of what he’s doing. Or of Chibs’ hand. He’s lost somewhere, or about to drift away, and Chibs squeezes his hand a little harder. Juice looks up again, facing him and the grimaze that’s meant to be a smile, to show he’s fine, is nothing but painful to watch. There’s a book of poems belonging to Juice’s rapist in the kid’s bag and nothing’s fucking fine by any standard.
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

TW: Mentions of past violence and abuse. Also take note that I'm changing the past just a little as well, in one scene from prison.

From prison to a motel and grocery store. Then the woods, the hospital, a priest’s guestroom and now a cabin. Years of loneliness, of people only caring about you as much as one can care about a con who could become a bad number in the statistics when it’s time for election. A few weeks of honest living but still in darkness, no real place anywhere, but hasn’t that always been the case? Juice has never felt like he truly belongs to another person. Apart from Tully, perhaps.

It’s not the escape or the hiding that’s wearing him down this time, as he’s curling to a ball in the bed again after breakfast. He stopped running once he ended up in hospital, physically and mentally. There simply isn’t any strength left for an escape anymore, not unless someone’s carrying him away. Which, in a way, Chibs has. No, what makes him feel like a goddamn corpse held up by strings, are all the sudden changes, good and bad alike.

Too many rooms, beds, faces and voices. Too many new smells. Too many people saying his name. There used to be too many lies and now there’s just too many truths and most of them just as ugly as the lies. Coming alive is no less painful than slowly dying. He’s been picked apart for such a long time, it feels normal to him. Been used to separate himself, his thoughts and feelings, from various parts of his body, depending on which one hurt the most in that particular moment.

The loss of the ink was one of the worst. Juice doesn’t remember the sessions in detail, since Tully had made sure his punk was dead drunk on bad prison booze and lax everytime. It was meant to help with the pain and the guy bleaching the ink out had been a pro, using real ink tools and Juice still doesn’t know how Tully managed to get them, or why. It did save Juice’s skin from fire, knife or black blotches, but it wasn’t out of care for him, just a way for Tully to keep his bitch less messy and more fuckable. Apart from the partly numbed physical pain and the aching hole in his chest that kept getting bigger as the last signs of his old family were decreased, all Juice could feel was apathy.

Later, once the last session was done and Tully was pleased with the result, Juice laid in his bunk for the remaining of the day and evening, turning down dinner and just shut the world out, as much as the surroundings and mist of booze and dull pain, mental and physical, allowed it. He’d thrown up a couple of times and by night, when lights were out, Tully had come to his bunk.

Juice had a feeling by then, that if he begged, maybe Tully could be more gentle. He didn’t want to beg, avoided it as long as he could, but that night he’d been sore and fragile, fucked up from the moonshine and lost in a way he’d not felt before and so when those weirdly warm fingers started to trail down his spine, Juice had begged the nazi to go easy on him. It could’ve gone either way, Juice was prepared for the opposite of his request, but whatever sliver of humanity the nazi rapist still had, it could apparently show on rare occasions.

A part of Juice, the last one that seemed to actually care about anything anymore, had been internally screaming and crying, protesting wildly against this utter humiliation for taking comfort in the arms
of a man who saw him as nothing more than a tight and powerless hole to fuck. But he’d not let that voice out as Tully, instead of just putting him on his stomach, pulled him to lay on the side so he could spoon him.

The grip around his stomach without touching the sore chest had been comforting, the sense of something alive and warm behind him had kept his mind from reeling. He’d not made a sound when Tully breeched him, slick and slow, not rough as in the beginning. A care, not for him or his body as a person, but for a possession and the risk of loosing it if the pain would become too much to bare in silence. A scream, that was all it would take, for someone to hear, to come inside and remove the man’s body from him, but for what? You don’t scream for your life when you’re already dead and a dead man doesn’t belong anywhere but in the ground.

Was I not vexed, in these gloomy ways to walk alone so long? Around me, wretches uttering praise, or howling o’er their hopeless days…

Days. What a joke. He’s been crying enough for several lifetimes already. Didn’t help before and wont help now. Not against the flood of memories he’s tried so hard to keep away. It’s been easier to just remember a few of the faces he didn’t really see because he was on his stomach. Easier to pretend it was just the chinks, just Tully. As fucked up as it might seem to any normal person, it was easier to accept too. Retaliation between gangs. A trade of goods.

Being shared by shot callers, that’s at least within the spectrum of what a rat still useful for the club can expect in prison, apart from simply end up dead on spot. The part of Juice’s mind that will always think like the outlaw he once was, can see the a cruel logic in that, for what it’s worth. What neither part of him seem able to accept, is that once the chinks were done with him, Henderson, the guard, took him too. The chinks had left by then and Juice hadn’t been able to stay quiet anymore, his hole on fire and the flustered guard a heavy weight on his back, only getting more excited from Juice’s tears.

Up until now, he’s somehow been able to squeeze that memory into the one with the chinks. Four for three, so to say, like the fourth one really didn’t count. One more cock wouldn’t matter, right? Even if it wore a guard’s uniform. All Juice was in there, after all, was someone’s asshole. And he’d not had the strenght to hold back the tears a fourth time as the man had entered him, dry and violent, chuckling at the pathetic whimpers, calling him names and asking if he wanted breakfast in bed.

The only mercy had been that Juice, after a few violent thrusts, passed out from the pain and when he woke up, he was on enough painkillers to not do much more than whimper when the medics washed him. No matter how the staff asked him, the doc, the nurses, the prison ward, the guards, he stayed silent. The rat had learned his lesson and he wouldn’t go out branded as a punk to anymore people than necessary.

What hurt the most, had been to learn that Jax hadn’t shown a single feeling for him when meeting Tully, even before he knew about Juice’s unfortunate part in Tara’s death. He was already doomed, already decided to be a sacrifice no matter what and Jax just didn’t care. Juice knew Tully wasn’t lying when he told about the meeting once Juice was back from the ward after the failed execution. He knew Jax, finally, when it was too late, and the dry voice that didn’t cover any lack of care with false, sickly concern was painting a picture of him that felt more true than anything Jax had ever shown. The covering of non-existing empathy, wrapped so skillfully in layers and layers of sunny smiles, blue eyes, concerned words and sweet tones of voice.

Jax and Tully are both dead and Juice is pressing his knees to his chest in this bed that, just like the others he’s slept in for the last years, isn’t his own and never will be. The Reaper didn’t let him go.
He’s just waiting, ever so patient, to take what’s his.
Chapter 30

“I’m leavin’ soon.”

The form under the cover makes a small sound and at any other moment, Chibs would say he sounds like a petulant child determined to sulk for not getting his way. Or a very pouty girlfriend who wants attention and feels abandoned for no reason. At any other moment, but not this. The full extent of what the man has been through, is impossible to digest right now. It’s not one of those truths and explanations that will solve anything or point out the right direction to move forward just by being out in the open.

Chibs is a medic, not a psychiatrist and his methods are sometimes harsh, even brutal, because that’s how he learned to survive and to make other people survive. By keeping his head clear and heart still. The army, IRA and Samcro aren’t places for the fainthearted and a place in any of them means sacrifices a normal life won’t prepare you for. Not brimming over with emotions is essential for surviving both bodily and mentally and it’s often been Chibs’ task to act like a group’s calm and sense when feelings are spilled all over and people are ready to make horribly stupid decisions in the heat of the moment.

That’s how Chibs reacted to Juice’s suicide attempt and his first treason, the one he punched him up and down the garage for. Once he was able to do something, he kept most of his emotions locked down, because if he hadn’t, he’d not been able to punish the man or turn his back on him. To save himself from making decisions out of his own personal feelings rather than the benefit of the club. Right now, without all the things he knows, he’d probably call the kid a childish fucking pussy and just leave, but that’s no longer an option.

“Juicyboy…”

The man doesn’t move and Chibs lays down beside him, spooning the sore body. The kitten is purring and the irritation Chibs has felt for her, is considerably less than before. Not that he’s suddenly a pet person, but the kid’s need for her is so much easier to understand now. When thinking of it, it’s actually baffling that Juice is letting any human, let alone a man, anywhere near him at all. Chibs leans in to nuzzle his neck, forcing away the part of him that has no patience with this, willing the softer man to come forth instead. It’s still somehow a very strange yet still natural thing to do.

“T’is just a short errand, ye numpty.”

A small sigh moves the thin body and Chibs entangles their fingers together, squeezing the hand.

“I’m not gonnae leave ye, lad. Hear tha’? Aint dumpin’ ye here or anythin’, I’m comin’ back as soon as I can, I promise.”

Finally, there’s a response. Juice squeezes back, a wordless sign that he’s listening, understanding, perhaps even accepting with what little trust he has left for Chibs or anyone. The notion of the poetry book is impossible to shelve aside and Chibs isn’t sure there’s any right moment to bring it up, or a right way. Only different kinds of awful ones, all of them painful and none of them certain to make it better. Now, how ever, is definitely the wrong one. Right now, all he can do is promising he’ll be back, that he’s not gonna abandon the man. Not scold or being sarcastic, just show patience and a solid strength Chibs, if he can’t feel it, will fake until he makes it. Showing the kid some kind of consistency to hold onto. Letting him see the man beneath the patch and cut.
But the man looks so hopelessly tired and lonely, trapped inside that head that just seems to think all the time but never setting anything straight. A literal chaos his organizing skills can’t fix. There’s no pull yourself together that works with this one, at least that much is clear now. So Chibs just pulls him closer, burying his mouth in the crook of his neck.

“I love ye, laddie. Always have, always will… No matter what.”
“Love you too…”

It’s just a whisper, but Chibs is more than grateful for it right now and he turns Juice’s head carefully to kiss him. It’s a little tense at first, but then some of the lad’s tension seems to melt away and he opens up, pulling a hand through Chibs’ hair and when they break, the brown eyes don’t look so glassy and hollow anymore.

“See you later then, Chibbie.”
“Aye. Be nice to Venus.”

A smile, almost a chuckle.

”Has anyone been disrespectful to her and lived to tell the tale?”

Chibs chuckles as well now, pressing one last, shallow kiss on the very kissable lips – fuck, when did he become such a *fag*?

“Don’t think so, so don’ try to be the first one, aye? Try an’ take it easy, Juicy. Rest, ye know.”
“Promise. Don’t let Tig wait unless you want to hear jokes about you growing overies and tits the rest of the day.”

Still smiling, but so tired, so goddamn tired and Chibs gets up, adjusting the blanket a little and glares at the kitten. Juice’s eyes are already half shut but he sees it and the smile seems plastered on his face. It’s the last thing Chibs sees before leaving.
Chapter 31

He’s not feeling much apart from relief of having Dyna back and that’s probably just as well. Not good, but better. Better than getting all riled up, panicking or crumble in fear. Maybe it’s just the swift turns that are forcing him to shut down a bit, making him too tired to care. It’s a defense mechanism he’s used lots of times before, zoning out sort of and shut off the gateway to reactions that won’t help, only increase the feelings of helplessness, pain and humiliation.

The meds help. At least to make his mind significantly less loud. His thoughts are no longer screaming at him, only whispering and they’re all so tangled up in one another it’s like walking in a mist, only without the stress and fear. He’s not really sure of his surroundings or where to go, but it’s not terrifying anymore. In a way, it reminds of when Tully gave him coke. As with the lube and the poetry reading, it was a small sign of not care but at least lack of lust to make him feel more miserable just for the sake of it.

Dyna has been fed and she’s curled up against his chest again, purring and kneading with her small paws. It’s soothing in a way neither the meds nor Chibs’ company are. She doesn’t know about treason, doesn’t know what humans are capable of doing even when their intentions are the best, and certainly not how low you can sink when all you want is destruction and chaos. Juice never wanted that, quite the opposite, and just look where he ended up. He’s not even sure if he’s interested in living, despite the efforts put in from the priest, Chibs and others. How’s that for ingratitude?

One day you’re a Son, you finally belong somewhere with people accepting you, calling you friend and brother. Despite your awkwardness, your nerdy style, your lack of confidence and the way you blush when feeling shy and nervous. You’re one of them, wearing the same patch and your vote counts as equal to the others. It’s overwhelming, more than you really understand, and deep down there’s that lingering fear from years and years back, that maybe, maybe this is too good to be true. Or at least to last.

You’re not Clay and Piney, who were so sure of their positions and value to the club, they couldn’t imagine what being left in the cold could feel like. You’re definitely not Jax, the heir and prince, who knew no other life than this and was tied to it in a way that allowed him to adjust the patch to suit him, other than submit himself to mold into the patch. It was his birthright, after all. In the same way, you’re not Opie, who just like Jax had a bloodline to the club, just like you’re not Chibs, who already had a patch of another sort and an experience of bloodloss the others hadn’t. He knew how ugly things could get, had seen it first hand and that made him the voice of reason, but maybe also the one who more than anyone understood what the patch demanded.

You’re not Tig, able to cover up your strangeness and weakness with seemingly reckless and sick violence, to keep both the ugliness and beauty balanced without getting lost. You remember how he didn’t give a shit what you or the others thought, when he met Venus for the first time in the blackmail errand. He was just mesmerized by the trans woman and completely unable to hide it, not even making an attempt to be discrete, but actually ogled through the sun-blind after her when she left. If he felt any shame, he hid it well.

Juice sighs. His chest is still a bit sore from the pneumonia and sometimes the air hurts. Like it’s forcing it’s way down to lungs that would much rather be left alone. And he’s not Chibs, Jax, Tig or any other person. Just himself and to be honest, he’s not sure who that man is. It’s been such a long time since the will and wishes of Juice Ortiz meant anything to anyone at all. Least of all to himself.
It’s not exactly true now, if he’s honest. For some reason Chibs thinks he still loves him and takes huge risks by showing it, by taking him here. It’s the fourth bed in the forth place Juice has slept in since prison and it’s only been a few months. He may have company, even being carried by others, but he’s still on the run and it’s taking it’s toll on him.

This is when Juice, if he knew himself better and had talked to anyone about his mind, should hesitate and remember how this kind of thinking in solitude effects him, that his head will spin in circles and nothing will make any sense. The meds make them less loud and frightening, but today they don’t help with the pace or the amount. Juice’s head is formly brimming with thoughts, messy and pointless, jumping from one to another without any logical direction. He reckognize is from when he tried to off himself, but can’t control how he’s curling up harder, causing Dyna to move a little with a small sound of malcontent.

She curls to a little roll on a safe distance from Juice’s tightening, locked up body and her presence keeps him from falling over the edge to a panic attack. Or maybe not. Deliberate self-harm is not, unless you count the suicide attempt and self-neglect in that category, not among the problems Juice have and he’s not clawing and gnawing his hands on purpose. It’s just the stress boiling over at a point where meds or kittens no longer help to keep it at bay and biting and scratching violently is all that’s left.

He has rough palms and fingers. Mechanic hands, with all the little marks years of working with engines can leave you with. The nails are hard, not too sharp but he’s not cut them in a while and they’re excellent tools to ruin skin with. To keep the thoughts on distance.

Hands, wrists, up under the hoodie and onto the chest. He’s not even doing it for punishment or out of self-hate. It’s a mindless, barely aware physical reaction to a stress he can’t handle, of emotions and thoughts bleeding all over him, chaotic and senseless. Pointless too, because it doesn’t help, doesn’t change anything and isn’t even giving the kind of momentarily emotional relief that makes people violate themselves like this. Juice simply can’t stop, just has to do something with his hands to make his mind shut up and even as he sees the blood, he’s unable to force himself to stillness. Having a breather from his brain is just far too needed right now.
Chapter 32

He has his reasons not to tell Juice more than he has to. Especially about things even slightly involved with the club. It’s not a concealment made out of pettiness, but out of history and the few pieces Chibs has been able to put together. It’s not so much distrusting Juice, as it’s distrusting what others may have done do his head and what poor choises the man could make because of that. The ride is, as always, helping Chibs focus, the long detour to not reveal the hiding place even necessary to make his mind clear and emotionally sober again.

The kid is safe with Venus, she knows the deal and wont let him do anything stupid. She’s physically stronger too, and that’s reassuring. If she really needs to, she could restrain him and honestly, there aren’t many people Chibs would trust to handle that, but Venus is a rare case and her too deep knowledge about being used and abused will help. At least she knows far better than Chibs what to do.

Changes. Swift, unmercifully changes are nothing new to either of them, thanks to their partly shared, partly very different history with the Sons. It’s what you’re signing up to, they’re called men of Mayhem, after all, and if you can’t handle chaos you’re not fit to wear the patch. The years that have passed since Jax met the truck, has given Chibs a lot of time to think though. Not only for others, but to himself in more moments of blissful silence than he’s had since John’s days. In a way, he’s been an outsider, no bloodbounds to either Charming, the Teller-Morrow familiy or Charming. His departure with Real IRA and transfer from Sambel to Samcro was in the open, he didn’t have anything to hide that the scars didn’t scream out anyway.

That time, clinging onto reason was what kept him from doing something really stupid, just like with the first kill for the IRA. Filling that hollow, gnawing pain with work, work and more work to keep his mind from giving over to heart and take a swing from a tree. His harsh tone has, in contrary with what Clay and Jax thought, been about protecting that wailing heart, the humanity that has to live with the notion of all the lives it has on it’s conscience. But if you’re able to kill your best friend, cowardly with the help of his wife, or murder your way through a club you claim to love, only to get what you want regardless of all the things you trample down on the way, you really don’t need to cling onto things to carry that load. Because without empathy, all you carry around is a sense of injustice directed to you and only you.

He’s so wrapped up in thoughts, he almost misses the exit to Charming and Chibs curses inwardly at his own sudden tendency to not keep his head clear on the road. He passes the little stores and the people, the cars and strollers. People are, maybe not happy with the Son’s presence, but at least far more okay with it these days. There hasn’t been a club related gunfire since Jax’s time and even despite the grim scars, people aren’t turning away to leave as soon as possible when the Samcro pres is in town. Some are even giving real smiles, and Chibs guesses it has all to do with the decreasing violence, the lack of gang wars and too visible criminality.

Samcro still deals with guns, but on a very small scale that doesn’t aid the IRA or any local gangs, keeping the violence as far away as possible from home. Along with the Teller-Morrow business, the trading with fraud branded clothes, jewlery and the best damn weed available in the area, plus Venus’ more than profitable escort servece, the club certainly isn’t on a downfall. It’s not good to dwell on how things could’ve been if Clay hadn’t been so fucking determined to stick with gun trading, or if Jax had had just a sliver of normal, fucking empathy – or if Juice had opened up earlier.

The way Chibs mind is leaping over to Juice is dangerous, because he no longer distrusts him and
the shield of transgressions that kept him on a distance, has been falling apart, not entirely but enough for Chibs to no longer be able to say it’s a battle between emotions and reason. You just don’t admit to that kind of thing, even under pressure, unless it’s true. And what a betrayed and devastated Chibs would’ve seen as a just punishment for ratting on the club three years ago, to protect himself from feeling a shite for Juice, is just not there anymore.

As he’s finally turning in on Teller-Morrow, the gate is opened by one of the prospects, Ricky, who’s the second black man to prospect since T.O. Openly, that is. Juice is half black and with the old bullshit rule, he kept it a secret, passing as brown. This color shite, which is really far less about pure racism and more about simpleminded people being convinced that a black, brown or yellow man is at risk of being more loyal to the peers of his color than the patch, is just a way of telling yourself that trust, loyalty and commitment are static and predetermined on the basis of something no one can choose. In other words: bullshit.

Chibs parks and turns the engine off and Ricky is closing the gate, steps a bit jumpy because he’s more or less incapable of staying still, always moving around. He eats like a horse and is still as skinny as a teenage boy, even though he’s almost thirty with fucking iron fists and a wife from Belize who, according to Ricky, is “too brown” to be accepted into his biological, black family. Samcro will be their family soon enough, Ricky is club material to the bone and has that habit of not wasting energy on stupid petty shite, but focusing on the big picture. It’ll be another three months before the prospect year is ended, but it’s already clear he’ll patch in.

“Ratboy’s looking for you, pres. Waiting in the chapel.”

Short and straight to the point. Chibs nods and then throws a look on the Harley Fat Boy one of the suburban kids with a very rich dad in Stockton left in for service a couple of days ago. It looked like the kid had crashed it on purpose and now it’s healing nicely. Ricky’s hands aren’t fidgeting when he handles bikes and he’s so focused on the task he’s not even noticing that Chibs is lingering.

“Good work ye’ve done here, Ricky.”

“Thanks.”

No more talking, the kid is busy and Chibs hides a smile as he walks up to the club house. Ricky is no less eager to impress than any other prospect, but when he’s working on a bike, he gets so caught up in the task, he’s more or less blind and deaf for anything less intrusive than a fire alarm – or his own rumbling tummy. Chibs suddenly realises he’s a little jealous of that. He’s lost that ability to focus completely on a task, see the big picture and just work through the obstacles methodically. Mainly because his task these last couple of months, has been something that mechanical skills are completely useless for. And Chibs is under no illusion that Ratboy is waiting with any kind of good news, or anymore acceptance for Juice. Especially since Chibs, for the first time, is absolutely, one hundred percent certain, that telling the truth would be the wrong thing to do, even if it’s the only thing that could give Juice another chance.
Chapter 33

“Oh, sweetheart…”
“Leave me alone. T’is nothing, I’m just…”
“Tryin’ to cover up your wounds, baby. Oh Juice, darling, don’t you know it’s futile to keep this hidden from me? C’mere, darling, and let Venus have a look.”

She’s calm, the man who knows he’s a woman, and she lifts just enough of the blanket to have a look at the mess Juice still keeps making worse with his blunt nails. He’s ready for a brusque talking, Chibs or Tig style, pointing out the stupidity he’s already aware of, but Venus simply takes his messy hands in her manicured ones. Soft as a woman’s, but strong as a man’s and the grasp is just firm enough to keep Juice from causing more damage.

“PTSD certainly is a bitch, baby. Not even little kittens or grumpy Scots can stop it entirely. Heart is such a fickle little thing, isn’t it? Sometimes it gets hurt in the most unexpected ways… and the wounds ending up on another place, entirely…”

It’s strangely relaxing, not being able to scratch or bite. She’s not hoovering over him, but sitting neatly and ladylike on the beds end in her pretty dress, looking both fragile and confident. Juice swallows, the panic is still there, only not acting out.

“Your dress… I’m gonna…”
“Be my guest, boy. This old rag isn’t my Sunday outfit. Or a least it wouldn’t be if I attended church, which I don’t.”

She winks and the sunny smile is showing again, covering up that glimpse of sadness Juice can see through because although their histories aren’t the same, there are some wounds similar enough to reckognized by someone carrying a heavy burden from the past.

“We gotta get this cleaned and wrapped up, love. And you should take your benzos.”
“Hate benzos…”
“Not as much as Chibs hates seeing you like this. C’mon, boy, sit up and let Venus fix you. Just wait here and I’ll get my magic bag. Alright?”
“Alright.”
“Good boy.”

It’s a bit demeaning – or at least it should be. But Venus, as far as Juice can remember from the time before everything went to shit, always spoke like that to people, even Jax. It’s just her way and the first time they met, every present member of Samcro was either amused, scared or in awe. Probably a little bit of all.

She’s away and back in a second, with a little black suitcase and she opens it on the bed. It’s filled with medical stuff.

“Now lets see, baby, what Venus can do to make it alright again… Oh, hello there, girl!”

Dyna, curious of the suitcase, has forgotten about hiding by her daddy’s chest and is nosing carefully over the jars, bottles and little tools. It’s almost shaped a bit like a medical box, with separate pockets in different sizes and neatly organized. Venus grabs a bottle of medical hand rub, coats her hands and puts plastic gloves on.
“Let me see that arm now, love.”

Juice reluctantly reaches it out for her, exposing the clawed skin and he feels stupid, like he’s some kind of petulant teenager using razors to cry for attention. He hisses as the man who knows she’s a woman wipes it with the stinging fluid.

“You’re alright, baby?”
“Yeah… Didn’t… Didn’t do it on purpose, just so you know.”
“Stop it, Juice, I’m not one of them Samcro boys or tough as nails old ladies, judging a man for admitting pain.”
“T’is just fucking stupid… Ouch!”

He grimazes from the cleaning of the other arm.

“Deserved that, I guess… Hey!”

Venus tugs very playfully at his hair, looking like a school teacher or something.

“Don’t put yourself down like that, love. You don’t deserve anymore pain, Juice, and if I hear you saying any of the sort, I’ll spank you.”

Juice snorts.

“Yeah, Chibs threatened with that too. He’s gonna be so pissed when he…”
“Don’t get yourself all worked up into another fit, baby. I’ll handle the Scot, don’t worry. Just hold still.”

She’s careful. Gentle and methodical, showing no rush or irritation. No overly sarcastic comfort like Gemma did, or the clinical kind Tara had.

“Thoughts got too messy, darling?”

Juice swallows. Nods.

“Yeah.”
“No wonder, considering all the turns your life has taken recently. I understand more than you might think, Juice. And don’t worry about Alexander, sweetheart. He’s not gonna do you any harm, I swear.”

He believes her. She can’t control Tig physically, but her influence truly means a lot. She doesn’t seem nearly as tough as Gemma when looking at and hearing her, but the calm confidence in the way she does things, speaks of a different kind of power.

When she’s done with her tending, Juice’s gnawed arms arms are both wrapped up in swathe, just enough to cover and soothe a little. It’s not until now that Juice sees the dog, Mina, sitting next to her mommy, without getting ready to chase Dyna. Venus strokes Juice’s cheek, the male index finger softened from the use of expensive hand creme.

“Gonna take your meds now, baby?”
“Yeah…”
“And how about some coffee and a piece of pie?”
“Pie?”

He hates how his voice sounds afraid again and Venus once again takes his hands that are beginning to move without Juice noticing.

“Any particular kind of pie you don’t like, Juice, or all of them?”

Plastic fork. Plastic tray plate. *Just let me finish my…*

“Cherry… Not cherry…”
“How about apple pie?”

Far more memories. The most American fucking dessert you just can’t miss unless you’re allergic. Cafés. Dinners at Gemma’s. Diners, coffee shops, McDonalds, Wendy’s… The smell of sweetness and cinnamon, a stupid sence of home Juice actually can’t remember from his own. He nods, forces a little smile even.

“Sounds good.”
“Well, Juice, then come with me to the kitchen and I’ll serve you a freshly made apple pie with custard, Venus style, and a nice cup of coffee.”
“Why? Why should we risk anything for *him*, Chibs?”
“Ye think I’m lying?”
“This isn’t about you, pres, it’s about the rat.”

Happy’s cold eyes are calm, they always are, and nothing in his body language suggests he’s upset from hearing what Gaines revealed to Chibs. That, along with the refusal of saying Juice’s name, is how Chibs knows exactly how much the man hates and detests this. Happy chews on his toothpick.

“And even if he didn’t rat after he came back from infirmary, who knows if he even had anything to spill. He didn’t have any more secrets on us.”

Ratboy and Quinn are nodding now and Chibs sighs.

“According to Gaines, he could’ve brought us down to complete ruin on several occasions, but chose not to.”
“So?”

Happy throws his hands out, clearly not understanding and Tig rolls his eyes.

“Listen, you fucking redneck. His other transgressions aside, for some fucking reason Juice didn’t use any shit he knew against us once Tully had him. Did’t say a word and the cops were on him all the time. Aint saying it erases his treason, but come on, Happy. You honestly think that you or any of us here, would’ve lasted that long and still kept shut for a club who’d kicked you out?”
“That’s what we signed up for!”
“Alright, calm the fuck down…”

Ratboy is holding a hand up and sighs. Chibs nods at him to continue.

“I trust you all and you know that. And I loved Jax, but if this is true and I’m not gonna call Gaines a liar simply because I don’t give a shit about Juice, then we have a big fucking problem.”

Happy snorts.

“And what’s that?”
“That no matter what Juice did in the past, he may also have saved us from something worse, even after he was excommunicated and had no reason to help us.”
“Jax lied to him as well.”

Everyone’s looking straight at Chibs now and there’s a mixture of disbelief, anger, questioning but mostly just weariness among the men of Mayhem. They’re tired too, Chibs realises. Tired of old schemes, lies and decisions taken off the table. Chibs makes a grimaze that could mean anything or nothing.

“I’m not… asking any of ye to say, think or do shite ye can’t stand for. If ye hate’im, then ye do and no one has to like this or give him another chance. All I ask, is for ye to think of Jax and how we all wanted, hoped for, that we could’ve taken another vote.”

He swallows.
“I… I want to believe, tha’ all of us, had we been given the slightest chance, got onto some fucking information tha’ could’ve put Jax in a different light, then we’d waited. I just can’t… take that kind of chance again, boys.”

There’s silence and Chibs realises he’s spoken this emotionally before by the gavel, or any other time here. He’s never used the patch or his titles, neither as a VP nor as president, to make a decision based on his own desires and that makes him different from Clay, Jax and even John. He’s bringing his heart to the table, putting it under the gavel, at the risk of not only looking weak but even unfit. He’s in love with Juice, which along with the horrifying details of the man’s unfit punishment, is the one thing he can keep to himself without seeing it as keeping things from the club. Samcro has changed, is changing, slowly but steadily and right now certainly isn’t the right moment to express anything deeper. It would only make things worse.

Happy still looks untouched and Ratboy and Quinn like they’re genuinely struggling to make up their minds. Torn between their distrust in Juice and their trust in Chibs. Their image of Jax. T.O. is more pragmatic and Tig is already on Chibs’ side only not showing it too openly. Montez folds his hands together.

“I’m really with Happy on this one, pres, but I’m not comfortable voting on anything unless we have all the facts. If, if there are any doubts Juice didn’t deserve the Mayhem vote nor the excommunication, I want them on the table before I make up my mind. And I can’t see any reason what so ever not to trust Gaines, no matter what I think of Juice. No one here’s calling Gaines a liar, right?”

Of course not. Gaines is a trusted Samcro member and not known for letting his personal feelings take over. He has no personal connection to Juice, nor any old beefs with Jax to make his testament less trustworthy and besides, the lack of heat during Juice’s time inside speaks for itself.

Happy plays with his toothpick.

“I hate the idea of having the rat anywhere near us, but I hate fucking hillbillies in sheets more. Had enough of them with the Nordics and it’s not gonna look good if the Aryans think they’re controlling anyone connected to us, even if it’s a rat. It’s not their decision to make anyway.”

Nods and approving mumbles from every seat and Chibs has to make a serious effort to remain calm and neutral, not showing how relieved he is. He looks around the table.

“All in favour of not making any moves, but protect Juice until we have all the facts, and being open to the possibility tha’ we may have to reconsider any other decision made on previous facts? An’ tha’, in case we come to the conclusion there are no extenuating circumstances, the Mayhem vote will be up on the table again?”

It even hurts to say the last thing, but he has to. Has to show them he’s not desperately looking for a way out for Juice, blinded by personal feelings. But for every yay around the table, some even with an approving nod added to it, the knots in his chest Chibs wasn’t even aware of, are loosening up a little.

When Chibs puts the gavel down, the decision is unanimous and it’s the sound of tree against tree telling that Juice no longer is persona non grata, at least not officially, and that not only seeing, but actively helping him, isn’t compromising Chibs’ loyalty. What each and every member really thinks in his heart, is another matter and knowing how much Chibs himself is hiding, he’s not stupid.
enough to think that no one rather had seen the gavel sound for a Mayhem vote. And the kind of suffering Juice has been through for the club, if it’s true and no more lies, misconceptions or headless emotions are clouding Chibs’ judgement this time, isn’t something to drag out in the light.

That’s not Chibs’ truth to tell and even if it was, he honestly can’t say he would share it unless Juice’s life was literally saved by it. Because it’s the kind of truth you, if you have any sense of fucking decency inside you, would actually hope for and wish to be a lie.
Chapter 35

He can’t defend his actions. It feels like the time when Chibs saw him coming from the tree. It
doesn’t matter that he didn’t do this on purpose or had any intention to off himself this time, because
the memories are stronger than him, the memories of the disappointment, the utter ruin he saw in
Chibs’ eyes that time, and it’s blended with the meeting at the diner, when the man told him to off
himself.

“Juice… Look at me. Look at me!”

Anger. Sorrow. Betrayal. It’s breaking Juice down, makes him lose words of explanation because
all his sense of any self-value, has always been in being someone to the club and to this man. And
Juice is once again failing, proving himself a coward. Chibs looks exactly like he did in the diner,
like he’s almost been fooled to care again, but slipped away just in time.

“Filip?”

Venus. Goddess of love, wasn’t that Venus? Juice never paid much attention in school but this
Venus sure seems more than just a woman, the way she’s showing up in the doorway, putting a hand
on Chibs’ shoulder. The on-the-edge-on-some-kind-of-emotional-ruin president is interrupted and
he’s not any less immune to the man who knows she’s a woman than Juice.

“I think you’ve come to the wrong conclusion here, Filip. Will you let me explain things a little bit
before you start yelling, love? Can save your time as well as your vocal cords and my ears.”

With another doubtful, exasperated look at Juice, Chibs reluctantly follows Venus out, leaving Juice
alone with his kitten, his ugly skin and stupid brain. The shame.

He’s never been good at explaining himself. When people in any way close to him, even if it’s just a
teacher or a neighbor, have been questioning him about anything, being a sloppy made homework or
something, he’s always felt like he’s already judged. That his voice, his words holds no bearing and
it’s only gonna get worse if he starts talking. He learned that from Brian Parks, his stepdad, and it’s a
lesson he learned well.

Dyna wants to play and another pang of guilt hits Juice. Maybe the cat would be better off with
someone else. Not a stupid child, of course, but a real cat lover who’ll buy her scratching trees and a
real cat bed she won’t use because cats won’t let anyone decide that for them.

The soft fur is a stark contrast to Juice stinging arms, the gentle kneading from the paws almost
making him think he deserves some comfort. Juice isn’t sure how long he’s waiting, just that petting
Dyna makes it a little easier. Cats know no shame. Not for themselves or others. Animals are very
good that way. Easier to please, harder to displease than humans. Steps on the other side of the door
and the sound from the doorknob. Dyna’s ears are turning towards it and she’s stopping right in a
step to look at the rude person who interrupted her important task with using her daddy as a cat bed.

The door is closed and the slow steps coming closer, the sound of joints cracking a little as Chibs
squats by the bed. His movements sound tired, like he’s been carrying the world on his shoulders for
too long and only lifted it off recently.

“Ye’re protected. By the club.”
His voice is tired too.

“Don’t you mean from the club?”
“No.”

Now Juice, despite his pitiful state, has to turn around and look. He knows he’s probably looking like shit and the wrapped up arms aren’t exactly decreasing that impression. Chibs, however, doesn’t look angry or distant. Only sad and tired. He looks at the poorly hidden damage and then, to Juice’s surprise, takes his hand.

“T ook it to the table. Not… all of it, but enough to give’em a chance to vote for real. The club will protect ye from the Aryans or anyone else tryin’ to fuck with ye.”

Juice just stares and Chibs takes a deep breath.

“Not everyone liked it, can tell ye tha’, an’ I can’t promise to protect ye if it turns out tha’ ye’ re hiding anymore shite, if ye’ ve done or do anything against the club again. Get tha’?”
“Of course.”

He sounds very pathetic, at least to his own ears, but Chibs squeezes his hand a little and strokes his hair with his free hand. It’s gentle, almost too much so, and Juice once again feels like he doesn’t deserve this kindness. He swallows.

“I didn’t try to…”

Thick, dry throat. Itching eyes. Fuck.

“Not fishing for sympathy, Chibs… Wasn’t on purpose.”
“I know.”

A sigh, another squeeze. Then the same old kiss on his forehead. No harsh words of cowardice, weakness or betrayal. Just the scraping beard on his skin, the familiar scent of tobacco, engine grease and cheap soap.

“Wont solve shite tha’ way, kiddo.”

Juice almost snorts.

“Panic attacks usually aren’t very problem-solving oriented. Thought you’d be hoarse from screaming at me by now.”
“I would, but tha’ s not gonnae solve anythin’ either.”
“Probably not.”

Panic rarely listens to that kind of anger. At least not in a good way. And as it right now, Juice knows he’s very much at risk of getting another panic attack if things get too heated. All these changes after years of same old routine and numbness just aren’t easy to handle, even those who’re changing to the better.

“I’m sorry, Chibs.”
“I’m not angry with ye, ye numpty.”
The man carefully raises and sits on the bed, not losing the grip of Juice’s hand. The brown eyes aren’t disappointed or angry, not looking for errors or trying to be intimidating.

“Can’t handle things like this, Juicyboy. I understand ye didn’t do it on purpose, but ye’ve gotta have a plan for dealing with it, alright? Got any room for me on tha’ bed?”

This isn’t right. He should be yelled and scolded at. Left and despised, hear the door being shut and the steps walking away from him. Juice moves further in and Chibs lays down, putting one arm under his neck and the other around his chest, careful to not touch the sore arms.

“Ye gotta stay up here for a while. Not alone, someone will be with ye all the time.”

It’s not a suggestion, it’s final and Juice knows there’s no use to argue with the man or get any more details. He’s gotta trust him even he’s at his mercy. Juice isn’t fooling himself, if it wasn’t for Chibs the club would’ve put him down a long time ago. In hindsight, maybe they should’ve taken another Mayhem vote, but Juice isn’t gonna say that to Chibs’ face. Not when the man has put his own reputation at risk for helping him. He just needs one confirmation.

“You’re staying with me tonight?”

He feels ashamed for the begging formed as a question. For asking for protection against the nightmares and the loneliness. But he’s desperate too and desperate people can’t afford too much pride. Someone like Juice probably doesn’t even have any to begin with. Chibs nuzzles his neck, pressing a shallow, but warm kiss on his spine.

“Of course I am, ye muppet.”
Chapter 36

It’s almost domestic. He’s still angry to some extent, but not really with Juice. Sitting with him by the telly, even if there’s distance between them, feels peaceful right now. The kid may appear weak, but he’s not running away, not hiding his wounds or shutting off entirely. In theory, Chibs knows how PTSD works. Memories, nightmares and even hallucinations attacking the brain and make you unable to think clear or make rational decisions. All you want is for the intrusion in your mind and body to go away.

No, Chibs isn’t angry with Juice. He’s furious with the people making the man feel like this. Those who have broken him and the horrific price he paid for trying to repair the damage his treason caused. Had Bobby still been around, he’d demanded revenge and had Jax still been around, he’d just not cared unless he could use Juice’s sacrifice to achieve a goal of his own. There are people who could’ve answered Chibs, but they’re all dead now, even if their lies are still poisoning the living. What kind of life did Juice have before the club, for being so easily manipulated? He’s not the sharpest tool in the box, God knows that, but he certainly isn’t a complete fucking idiot either.

Chibs glances at the crouching figure. Juice is holding his knees pressed to his chest, resting his chin on the now covered arms and his eyes fixed on the screen. Dyna is laying next to him, paws tucked in under her belly. Mina, Tiggy’s dog, seems to have come to terms with her existence and stays with Venus in the kitchen, probably mostly waiting for her daddy to come home.

The figure in baggy clothes looks soft, but is really tense and even if the dark gaze is looking, the eyes seem glassy and lost. It’s not like Chibs to even notice things like this, other than he’s doing it for purely medical reasons for the club. This isn’t the same. He’s not looking with the eyes of a trained medic focused on fixing a problem and look out for signs of increasing damage. Juice isn’t a task and what used to look like weakness and giving up, has changed. The loneliness in the punishment Jax sentenced Juice to, is practically steaming from the scrawny body.

Chibs suddenly can’t stand the distance, he doesn’t know why, and he touches Juice’s shoulder lightly, only to make the lad jump.

“Sorry.”
“S’alright.”

No, it isn’t. Nothing about this is anywhere near alright and they both know it. Chibs looks at the worried eyes and strokes the hoodie away from Juice’s head. It takes a few seconds, breaths that are strained and questioning, but then Juice leans into his touch, like a cat seeking pets. Chibs moves from the sofa, without loosing contact with the man and sinks down beside him on the floor.

An arm around the shoulder, a hand holding a wounded one. It’s so casual, nothing new or strange about it, not even among Sons. Physical closeness in itself isn’t a sign of weakness in the club, it’s all about how, when and with whom. Chibs tries to picture going without any kind of friendly touch for a couple of years, but can’t. It’s just too foreign to him. Even if he’d had a willing hole, a wet mouth to use, without the pats, the hugs and kisses, it simply wouldn’t be enough.

The sore joints and muscles under soft fabric requires more than food, rest and meds to move like they used to. Chibs may be one of the more pedagogic and patient ones among the members, but he’s not the kind of person who has the natural talent for caring about a longterm sick friend or family member. He wants results, efficient solutions and no fucking whining. He’s never had this
kind of role to play and he’s not sure he’s gonna do a very good job. Fiona never needed this, nor did Althea or any of the lasses he’s been with over the years.

Juice is too light on him, too small and all the truths Chibs can’t think of because they’d only make him crazy with anger and sorrow, must be re-shaped into something more manageable. So what if it feels fucking faggy and domestic, too soft or whatever. No one’s judging him but himself right now and Chibs knows how to handle his inner critic well enough.

Mina needs to go outside and Venus takes her, closes the door and leaves Chibs, Juice and the mountain lion alone for a while. A sigh comes from the form in his arms and then the familiar feeling of the lad’s efforts to suppress sobs. Chibs is sick of the crying, but it’s something he can’t do shite about, neither can Juice. It’s a part of the PTSD, at least some of it, and the clinical term for it makes it easier to handle – for Chibs, at least. He can use the facts, knowing that it’s no point in trying to brush it off, talk harshly or joke. And definitely not shaming the lad for it.

It’s such a strange situation, sitting on the floor in Piney’s old cabin, with Juice crying in his arms. Chibs can’t do or say anything right now to make it stop, it simply has to be endured. Too many truths to digest before Chibs can trust himself to talk and do things in his usual way. Should he try that now, he’d only make it worse for both of them and Juice curling up to him sobbing is better than him keeping the distance and get stuck in his own head again. Stupid lad. Stupid old, Scottish heart.

The way Juice feels makes Chibs weak and he needs to be strong now.

But it helps. Just waiting, holding and slowly petting the lad. The crying seems to decrease a little faster, even if Chibs doesn’t speak. All he does, is keeping Juice close to his chest, resting his mouth on his hair and stroking his arm, his hand. Showing he’s there, really, that he’s not judging him or demanding anything. Chibs can’t really recall when he felt like he actually had the time to care for anyone like this. He’s always been partly on the way to or away from something, never really having the time to give his time and just mere presence like this to someone.

It strikes him that tattoos, patches and all, really don’t control him right now. There’s no one to keep up a reputation for, just a man who’s own stupidity and fear made him do really wrong, pay for it and in the end way more than he ever should’ve. The things his body and mind have been put through… Chibs is holding him now for all the times he should’ve, but didn’t. Showing patience in a pathetic attempt to make up for when he didn’t sit down and let the lad take it in his own pace. Not calling him coward or laugh it off in a brusque hug in a bathroom. Chibs would never say it aloud, but it takes a lot of courage to show yourself this vulnerable to anyone and he knows that he wouldn’t be able to do it. Certainly not to a grumpy and mean old Scot.

Juice is breathing a little more calm with every slow minute passing. He’s still wetting Chibs’ chest but it’s slower now, less frantic and his thin frame not quite as tense, so it’s obviously helping to do nothing but wait and let the lad be close. At least there’s not another panic attack going on, no visible signs of another scratching fit to bloom out. Juice isn’t touching his arms at all and that’s good.

The telly has a pretty poor picture but it serves as a quite comfortable background. Chibs has no idea what kind of show it is he’s not watching, only that it looks like some kind of reality soap opera with too tanned twenty-five-year-olds looking for someone to fuck in the sunset or whatever. Chibs hasn’t gone without sex for this long since the last stint in jail but the girls on the screen all looks completely uninteresting to him. He’s not ready to dive into exactly how his feelings for Juice come to change or when and to which extent, not right now, but considering how he’s never been one to say no to a beautiful girl and certainly not been chaste in any way, his current lack of need for girls and fucking is… a bit unusual, to say the least. Or maybe he’s just getting old.
Juice shivers a little and Chibs is just about to remove his own hoodie to give him, when a knitted blanket lands next to him. Venus is back, smiling.

“Anyone hungry?”

She’s whispering too, in case Juice is sleeping, and Chibs shakes his head, wrapping the blanket around the man.

“Thanks, but I’ll wait a bit, darling.”
“Of course. There are sandwiches and pie in the fridge for you.”
“Ye’re an angel.”
“So I’ve been told. Oh, he had a little piece earlier, and some coffee, before you came back. Not much, but it’s better than nothing.”
“Aye. Thanks, love. Don’ suppose ye have somethin’ a bit stronger though?”
“Venus has it all, Filip.”

She leaves with that cheeky little smile that makes her look so… weirdly innocent, and comes back from the kitchen with a glass of scotch with ice.

“Here you go, sweetheart.”
“Oh, ye’re a saint…”
“First an angel, now a saint? Such a good Catholic, Filip.”

Chibs gives an amused smile at that, because the list of his transgressions would probably set a confessional on fire before he’s through half of it. The chilled drink is exactly what he needs right now, and he truly enjoys sipping on it instead of just swallowing in one gulp and risk to disturb Juice, who seems to have settled comfortably enough on his chest to calm down even further. He’s no longer crying or sobbing, just breathing in exhaustion, the aftermath of the fit and that’s good too.

“Gave him his meds just before you came, Filip.”

Oh, that explains the increasing relaxation. Chibs nods at Venus, not smiling again because frankly he’s too tired now, but he’s grateful and she sees it.

“Thanks, Venus.”

She’s an angel, dammit, and Tig doesn’t deserve her. Not that Chibs deserves Juice either, but still. What’s clear is that the kid deserves her care, her patience and whatever secret knowledge she seems to have, making her able to care for badly fucked up men, no matter how much they themselves or the world despise them.

If her relationship with Tig doesn’t proof that even when you hate and despise yourself, when you’re at the lowest, someone can still love you with all the shite you carry around and make you a better person, what would? Tig has become more soft, more thoughtful and less prone to violence and spite since Venus was accepted as an old lady among the others, but it hasn’t made Tig any less capable of handling business, any less committed to the club or less passionate in his work. Quite the contrary. He’s stronger, more passionate, more trustful.

Maybe that’s the key, Chibs thinks as he keeps petting the man in his arms. Having someone you know will love you with or without the patch. Not a child, but another adult, an equal who really doesn’t give a shite if you’re carrying the Reaper or not. Someone who isn’t with you out of duty or
to seek a thrill, but for you, just you. Chibs has had love in all his life, in one form or another, but never that kind. No one’s ever come that bare for him, just because of him, without trying to gain a favor. No one but Juice.
Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s the third time in one night and even in his sleeping state, Juice is ready to trade the nausea, the pain and nightmares for any amount of tears. The dream is a sickening cocktail of his treason, faces of dead people, Tully’s voice and the guard’s and chinks’ brutal hands and cocks. But now they have Chibs’ devastated, hard face added to them. He’s standing next to him, watching him being raped over and over again, without blinking an eye or saying a word. Just keeping watch over the punishment, making sure it’s done.

Juice is naked and on his stomach, chained to an examination table and when he turns his head, there’s a line of men waiting for Jax to tell them it’s their turn. The pres is standing in the door, taking the money, smiling, but never looking at him and Juice tries to scream, to make Jax look at him, but the man doesn’t hear and then the pain is back. Dry, sickening pain that steals his breath, thrashes him from inside out and then he sees Tully, who’s holding up a book and a jar with vaseline.

“Don’t worry, baby, I’ll make it easier for you, I promise…”

The nazi is bending down to kiss him and that’s when Juice is starting to thrash in his sleep, whimpering pathetically and trying to fight him off.

“Juice, it’s me! T’is Chibs, lovey! Look at me, lad, ye’re not with’im anymore! Nothin’s gonnae happen to ye, t’is just a bad dream!”

This time, the waking is as abrupt and violent as the dream itself and Juice finds himself bent over a bucket, throwing up while still crying and fighting the man that sounds like Chibs, but he can’t look to be sure because he’s got his head buried in the bucket and his insides are tearing apart.

“S’alright, kiddo… S’alright, ye’re only dreamin’ again. I’m right here with ye… Calm down, please, before ye scare the cat.”

Slowly, the worst shock is fading and Juice’s stomach starts to calm down just enough for him to look up from the bucket and he’s not recognizing the room at all, only it’s not prison.

“Where am I?”
“Piney’s old cabin. Ye reckognize me, lad?”
“Yeah… What happened?”
“Had another nightmare, love.”

Chibs is in his jeans and wifebeater, hair messy from sleep and he’s fumbling to light the bedlamp. He looks tired and worried, but not angry and Juice wants to appologies for ruining the man’s sleep, but he only starts crying more.

“I’m so-sorry, Chibs… I…”
“Hey, don’ go down tha’ road, kiddo. Nothin’ to apologies for, ye muppet. Didn’t get’em bloody nightmares on mail order, right?”

Juice laughs. Or, more like sobs and a huff with a barely visible smile, and Chibs plants a kiss on his
“S’gonnae get better in time, laddie… Long as ye’re fighting.”
“Done fighting…”
“No, ye’re not, ye fucking arsehole! Ye’re not givin’ up on yerself now, ye hear tha’? Not allowin’ it.”
“You’re deciding that for me now, huh?”
“Ye bet yer scrawny arse I am. Look at me, boy.”

Almost black eyes, warm and alive. Scars that for some reason don’t make the aging face look ugly at all. Chibs looks so serious and he’s stroking Juice’s cheek.

“Gonnae help ye through this mess, lovey. Ye hear tha’? Don’ be afraid, mo chridhe*… My little darlin’…”

Chibs’ way of shushing and rocking him, while also scolding a little, is surprisingly effective in bringing Juice back to the present, making him realise that Chibs didn’t watch him getting raped, that he didn’t order or approve it, didn’t even know about it and that it didn’t happen again this night, but was only a dream, however horrible. Juice tries to breathe slowly again and this time it’s easier.

He takes a little deeper breath and the air doesn’t hurt him, his lungs don’t protest and his stomach stays calm. Dyna, who must’ve left the bed earlier, jumps back up again, making her “talking” noise.

“Hey there, girl…”

She kneads around for a while, making head butts and purring, even licking his face. Chibs moves from the bed and goes to the kitchen, coming back with a wet tovel and a glass of orange juice.

“Wash yer face a bit, will ye? Need another pill?”

Juice takes the tovel, it feels really good against his sticky face, and he shakes his head.

“Don’t think so.”

Chibs hands over the glass to help him get rid of some of the taste of pukes. In the meantime, Dyna has snatched the man’s sleeping spot and Chibs glares at her.

“Yer high’n mighty princess is kickin’ me outta bed. Should I take to the couch, huh?”
“The hell you are!”

He’s not even thinking about what he’s saying, but can feel his cheeks heat and the Scot adds a small but warm smile to his grim, perpetual one. Almost teasing and Juice looks away, grateful for the dusk partly hiding his blushing.

“I… I meant…”

He’s interrupted by a kiss. Shallow but warm on his sore lips. Chibs then breaks it, puts the glass away and lays down. Dyna is protesting but moves and Chibs opens his arms in the safety of darkness and Juice finds himself just sliding into place, forgetting about what he was ashamed of this time. The scarred man puts the light out and cradles him, warm and safe, like a shield against whatever horrors trying to get into his mind.
It’s like his scrawny body is swallowed up by the other man’s warmth, but in an entirely good way. Like there’s nothing to worry about, no ghosts from the past nor the uncertain future. He’s protected, even from himself if needed, the grip careful not to put pressure on the wounds.

“Too weak… ’M too weak, Chibs…”
“No, ye’re not, lovey. Just a wee bit beaten. Gonnae heal, sweetheart, but ye’ve gotta stop fightin’ yerself an’ start focus on the right things.”
“And what’s that?”
“For now? Sleep.”

Sternness. Orders. Steady eyes. Grey hairs in the voice and strong hands. Those hands have beaten him too. Juice buries his face onto the man’s chest, feeling the firm strokes on his shoulders, a little pressure on the small of his back and then fingers tracing tentatively under his wifebeater. Pets and little kisses, callous fingertips along his spine. Juice turns his face up and next kiss lands on the corner of his mouth.

He still has his eyes closed and lets himself be kissed, shallowly but warm and slow, not rushed or heated. Chibs is careful, doesn’t grope or tug, isn’t impatient or playful. He’s caressing Juice back to sleep with his hands and mouth, every touch tender and purposeful, making him slowly relax again.

“I got ye, lad… Not goin’ anywhere, Juicyboy… Just try an’ sleep, darlin’…”

And after a while, after being petted, kissed and soothed by the low rumble of Chibs’ voice and Dyna’s purrs, Juice finally drifts off again, leaving the nightmares behind for the rest of the night.

Chapter End Notes

*my heart
Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

Have been a bit busy with the "real world" last couple of days, but now I can finally update :) I know I mostly update almost every day, but don't get worried if I don't, because it just means that I'm forced to do adult stuff like actually participating in the world of the living^^

“Good morning…”

Chibs squints at the man who’s sitting on the floor, smiling at him. Juice sits crosslegged, dressed in a pair of grey cargos and a black, worn hoodie, hair a little wet and he seems better. Or at least calm. Dyna is in his lap, getting petted and is on a playful mood, attacking her daddy like kittens do, kicking with her feet and nibbling on anything she can reach. At the moment, Juice’s fingers.

“Got any sleep? Know I thrashed around some…”

Regretful voice, ashamed maybe. Concerned that he might have ruined Chibs’ sleep. Chibs reaches for his fags and lighter.

“The army and the IRA taught me to sleep next to fat bastards snorin’, fartin’ an’ throwing their arms in my face through the night. I’m fine.”

The first smoke of the day is always the best and Chibs uses the empty glass as ashtray.

“Told yer meds yet?”
“Venus gave them. Had a shower too.”
“How long have ye been up?”
“Coupla hours.”

Juice looks straight at him now, smiling but his eyes are red-rimmed.

“Haven’t touched them.”

When Chibs gives him a questioning look, the kid bites his lip.

“The swathes.”

It takes a few seconds before Chibs is awake enough to understand what Juice is trying to say. The kid is still feeling guilty for what happened the other day, even if it wasn’t his fault and probably knows on some level that Chibs isn’t angry with him, but that things that make Chibs scared often comes out in the shape of anger and frustration. If he’d acted differently when Juice came back from the tree with the chain… Chibs cuts that thought off because it will only lead to a dead end of regret and a past neither of them can change. He blows out some smoke, feeling the nicotine kick in, and reaches his hand out to the man.
Juice still looks a little uncertain, but gets up with the kitten on his shoulder and takes Chibs hand. Chibs pulls him to sit on the bed, just holding the hand with bitten nails, stroking the back of it with his thumb before rolling the sleeve up to have a look. The swaths are neat and show no sign of having been tugged at. Venus did a good job. Juice makes a grimaze and pulls his hand back, fistimg and pressing it to his stomach with a hopeless little grin.

“Ate some yogurt with blueberries earlier. Looks like it’s staying down.”

Updates. Assuring Chibs he’s doing better, like it’s his duty to report progress for Chibs’ sake. Am I doing right? Is it enough? Is there room for me? What can I do to make you love me a little? I’ll punish myself too, if it’s necessary. Just say it and I’ll do it…

Chibs squeezes the hand.

“Ye had a really bad nightmare this time, Juicyboy…”

The kid snorts, still grinning.

“Doesn’t seem like the meds are helping with that part. Sorry if I…”
“Please stop apologizing for shite ye can’t help.”

He’s barking a little, making Juice tensing up, but after discovering the man’s self-damage, Chibs has had some time to think and he rubs the back of Juice’s hand with his thumb.

“PTSD is…”
“A bitch?”

Juice grins again and Chibs can’t help but let out half a laugh.

“Aye, tha’s one way of putting it.”

He then goes serious, looking at the weary man.

“Wanna talk about it?”
“Would you?”

Good point and Chibs shakes some ashes from the fag.

“No. Doesn’t mean I shouldn’t have, though.”
“Should or would?”

Chibs sighs.

“I don’t know, Juice. I’m not ye an’ I can’t make tha’ decision for ye.”
“Did I ask you to?”

It’s more clear to him now. How Juice’s mind, his thoughts and feelings are bleeding all over the man, allowing no escape and that every round in the ring with them, isn’t making him stronger, only more exhausted. No real rest unless he’s literally sedated.

“Ye’re not weak, Juicy.”
Juice seems a bit confused again and Chibs finishes the fag and stubs it out. He moves further into the wall, lifting the blanket. Although a little hesitant, Juice is laying down, letting himself be held again. Chibs sighs.

“Had it too. After my first kill for the IRA. Took hours before I could get any sleep at all an’ when I finally dozed off, I had nightmares. Woke up bawling me eyes out and Fiona had to shush me like a wee baby.”

The man isn’t tensing up again, that’s something, but he feels so worn out. If there’s want for change there, for getting better, it’s still smothered by the weariness, the stress and self-loathing. You don’t live this kind of life and just suddenly starts hate and dispise yourself. If you’re that kind of person, you don’t even get into this life, but is scared off early on by your sensitive conscience. Juice is a criminal, he’s not ashamed for breaking the law, he’s ashamed for not being strong enough to put out. And, as Chibs finally is starting to see, he has no sense for proportions, not to mention any reference levels left for what’s normal, what’s reasonable reactions in an anything but reasonable situation.

Chibs buries his mouth in Juice’s neck, kissing the spine again and stroking his chest with his free arm. Things have changed, are still changing, and Chibs isn’t sure he’s comfortable with the direction of it. He’s sure as hell not comfortable with the way his own emotions are running wild, even if he manages to keep them leashed to some extent. If the Aryans are truly coming after Juice, Chibs will wipe them from the face of Earth, not even leaving a piece of bone left for their trashy families to bury. They’ll learn that Chibs may not be in control of what he feels for Juice, but he’s very much in control of his position as the Samcro pres and no one, especially not some pale arsed scumbags in sheets are punishing anyone connected to the club without Chibs’ consent, not even an inofficially ex-communicated punk.
Chapter 39

Chapter Summary

Same morning as in the last chapter, with Juice's mind running a little wild...

When he was around eleven, one of the workers at the community youth center, called him “accidently stupid”. Juice, who still went by Juan or - when he was in trouble - Juan Carlos or Ortiz, was of course stupid enough to ask what it meant. The worker, a middle-aged full latino guy called Victor or Vic, had laughed at him and patted his head. He’d then explained that it meant Juice was getting into trouble because he would just do what older kids told him to, without thinking it through. Not because he necessarily wanted to raise hell, but because he just walked right into stupid things, sometimes completely by accident.

Juan, who wasn’t to be called Juice for another fifteen years or so, didn’t argue with the man because what would be the point. His teachers, his neighbors, the older kids… they already knew he was stupid and never missed an opportunity to point that out. Of course, they didn’t add accidently to it. Brian, his stepdad, added the belt instead. The end with the buckle. The man always seemed to have a reason. Bad grades, laziness, bad table manners, ungratitude, greediness, stupidity, messy bed and clothes, not looking him in the eyes, staring too much, looking cranky, smiling too widely, bad posture, cocky posture…

Mom usually wasn’t at home when it happened. If she was, Brian would only give some swats or box his ears. If she was away, it got a lot worse. Juice was old enough to take care of himself with clothes and showers so unless Brian got into his face, neck or hands – or made him limp – it went unnoticed and Juice may have appeared more obedient, but it wasn’t behaving, it was surviving and slowly pushed him to seek company and opportunities to feel less choked and weak. He’s never been thrilled with violence, it’s merely a necessary evil, but hacking? That’s power, probably the only area in his life where Juice has felt in control instead of the one who’s just following, listening and obeying.

It requires patience, eyes for details and taught him that muscles, height and attitude weren’t all, far from it. Now, he’s not so sure any of it would’ve helped at all, apart from not getting claimed in prison. What he’s sure of though, is that he doesn’t want to talk about that either. After all, it’s not a part of the life he chose, nor the parts of it that happened regardless of his choosing. Only a complete retard would choose more weakness. Making himself pliable and stupid has saved him numerous times from loosing teeth, eyes and limbs. From ending up in the ground all too early. And as a small and scrawny Juan Carlos became a little taller, little cockier JC, still skinny but with the teens growing height and muscles and a very much growing skillset of computors, the occasional stints in juvie got easier and Brian would use his words rather than his belt.

JC was sixteen when the asshole threw him out on the street, after destroying his laptop. Mom had been home too, crying and screaming at them to stop. JC didn’t know what he could do to stop Brian other than stay away and that’s how he ended up on the streets with a backpack of his belongings and the smashed laptop in a plastic bag along with a small hope that the hard drive could be saved.

Juice sighs. The memories aren’t nice ones, very few of those from his childhood are. Most of the
years before joining the sons aren’t exactly happy either. The only thing giving him confidence of any sort, was the computers and he learned that being useful was a much better way of staying something close to safe, than making yourself a target for other guys’ testosterone levels and need to show how much of a man they were. When a man JC sold weed to on regular basis needed help with his old PC, he got a first glimpse of how the love for a bike could look like. Eric Paul, fiftyfive years old with two gold teeth and the ugliest, pale tats JC had seen, was a computer virgin if ever there was one and in exchange for the help, he would let JC ride bitch on his old Shovelhead, since it “wasn’t acceptable” for a young man to think of cars as the only thing to get you somewhere.

Riding bitch seemed a little stupid when he straddled the blue Shovelhead behind Eric’s broad back, but from the moment JC felt the roar of that engine vibrate through his body, he was lost. He kept seeing Eric regularly, exchanging whatever help the old man needed for driving and mechanic lessons. It was a rare feeling not being called stupid all the time and as JC eventually was allowed to ride the Shovelhead by himself one time – an extremely rare favor – that was it. No more cars unless he had to.

Of course it wouldn’t last. JC didn’t even count on it, but was still devestated when Eric decided to move to his only daughter, her husband and their newly born kid in Austin – a fucking world away from Queens. He didn’t show it though, especially since the old man was so clearly happy about it and also had absolutely no reason to see JC as anything more than a business partner, albeit an unconventional one. But the day Eric left, all the hard work paid off in form of a job reference, praising his mechanic skills and work ethic, along with a real and for JC almost shockigly large pay check and an address to one of Eric’s old acquaintances, in need of a mechanic who knew his way around bikes.

The first time JC crossed the state border of California some years later, it was on the bike he would keep all along until the cops took it years later when shit went down. He loved his Dyna Super Glide and his confidence had grown enough for him to feel, if not happy with himself, so at least less weak among others. He’d done time for petty crimes, theft and computer fraud, but still felt awkward, shy and too silent, not in the fuck off way, but the wrong way. Still young enough to risk being seen as an easy target – and pretty enough among longtime prisoners in need of letting off some steam. He’d not made any friends, not that he’d expected that, but he’d not gone completely unnoticed either and the reason he’d kept going from Queens all the way down to California, was due to a one-legged inmate with Grim Reaper ink, “Greg the Peg”, making a call to his old friend Otto Delaney in Charming with a recommendation. And when JC was released, he had the address to Teller-Morrow on a piece of paper along with the name Clay Morrow in Greg’s messy handwriting.

He remembers being nervous as hell, but surprisingly good at hiding it. He remembers how small and idyllic Charming looked compared to NY, the original shop signs instead of chains, like a piece of land that had frozen in time, in a funny mixture of 50’s and 70’s. He’d found Teller-Morrow easily and been met by a young guy around his own age, perhaps a little younger, with blonde hair and blue eyes, introducing himself as Jax Teller.

It’s a sweet memory. Sweet and painful, because when Jax had put an arm around him, telling in that sunny, smooth voice how desperate they were for someone who knew the slightest shit about computers, JC felt welcome somewhere for the second time in his life. He’d been awkward and shy too, of course, not making the impression of being street smart in any way, but the guys he met the first day – Jax, Opie and Bobby as he remembers – didn’t seem to be that interested in Juice talking skills. Jax and Opie were desperate for upgraded tech stuff and Bobby just wanted the fucking landline and printer to work. They all called him JC.

Juice sighs. His mind is running around again and has been for a while since breakfast. Laying back
in bed with Chibs feels good, better than it should, but it’s not enough to keep him grounded right now. The man he met all those years back is sleeping heavily, holding him close in his arms.

JC had been, for lack of a better word, a guest at the club for a couple of days when the Scot showed up. The distinct voice had caught JC’s attention as he was going through the hopelessly old PC in the club’s office, a dialect he couldn’t really place, only that it wasn’t American in any way. Jax had called on him and when JC came out to the club’s bar, a guy looking roughly in his forties or a bit older, with very visible scars from the corners of the mouth all the way to his ears, just swept a shot of whiskey and put the glass down with a bang. Jax had nodded at them both.

“JC, this is Chibs, our Sergeant at Arms, club medic and constant reminder of how stupid we all are.”
“An’ ye need to hear it, Jackie boy. JC, aight?”

It sounded funny, the way he pronounced it. Juicy. The handshake rough and firm, eyes warmer than the scars suggested. JC had felt a little embarressed, as always when meeting an unfamiliar face, but scars or not, the smile was genuine and without thinking, he smiled too, his first real smile that wasn’t colored by fear or bravado, a shit eating grin as he realised he had a new nickname and, possibly, something akin to a new family.

“Ye’re thinking so hard I can see smoke…”

The voice is low, almost a whisper, but Juice startles a little anyway and is met with the brushing of the man’s beard against his neck, little kisses, nibbles and the warm hand rubbing over his chest with the bleached scars from the removed ink. The memories are too much, too painful to keep hidden all way and the hopelessness of it all, of the road to ruin he was cowardly heading onto, weak and afraid of loosing the only people who’d treated him like he belonged, never seem to stop crushing him. Overwhelming guilt and shame, for the things he did wrong and the things that were done to him, that he couldn’t stop.

The realization that he’s never been anyone until he was someone to others and on his own, he’s nothing. A disposable tool, at best, too stupid and desperate for a place to call home to think things true before acting. And the worst thing is, when being completely honest with himself, all the shitty, stupid and pathetic, sometimes cowardly and even treacherous things that lead him to this point in life, all come from the same place: that desperately lonesome spot inside him that wants the same thing now, as it did ten, fifteen, twenty and twentyfive years ago. For someone to open the door and arms, letting him in with all his stupidity, fear and cowardice, all his wounds, shame and guilt and just hold him like Chibs is holding him now, but with the solid promise never to let go. That it’s possible to not only forgive or accept, but actually… love him.
Chapter 40

There’s no hot water in the cabin. Electricity, running water and a normal toilet, yes, hot water, no. Piney had weird ideas sometimes. Chibs pretends he’s occupied with his tea – God bless Venus for remembering to buy that – and just watches Juice walking back and forth between the kitchen and the room they slept in, carrying pots with heated water from the gas burner to an enamel tub looking just big enough for a toddler. Juice doesn’t ask for help and is completely focused on the task, in that funny way he could be when diving deep into a problem at the garage. Just lost for the world until someone literally came in his way. When the tub is filled to three quarters, Juice turns the gas burner off, looking confused and frustrated. Chibs raises his eyebrows.

“Ye want some privacy, just say it. Venus and Mina are on a long hike somewhere.”
“Yeah… Shouldn’t… take too long. Feel greasy.”
“Just watch’em swathes. Wrap’em in something first.”

Juice just nods, looking through the cupboards, finding plastic bags. He uses a scissor to shape the material and successfully manages to cover up the swathes. Chibs catches the glimpse in the brown eyes, takes his smokes and the crossword puzzle he found in a stack of old magazines and leaves the cabin, careful not to let that nosy kitten get out too.

Chibs sits down outside, for once enjoying the peace and quiet the surroundings give him, and is soon able to sink back into the crossword puzzle. The sounds coming from inside aren’t worrying, but then there’s a sigh, a splash and muttering. Chibs puts the crossword puzzle down – he sucks at it anyway – and knocks on the door.

“Ye’re alright, Juice?”
“Y-yeah… Fuck… No… Can you give me a hand? Jesus…”

Muttering is better than panicking, for sure, and Chibs enters, seeing the man on his knees by the tub, pants all wet and the naked torso and stiff neck dripping with water.

“Can’t reach my damn back…”

He’s frustrated, his need to get rid of dirt and smell stronger than the shame of asking for help, for being seen like this. Not that Chibs thinks there’s anything to be ashamed of and he takes the cloth from Juice, squeezing out some of the water and silently starts washing the man’s back.

It’s different from when he helped him shower after a nightmare back at the depressing motel room. Juice is wide awake now, he asked for the help himself and only because his physical state actually stops him from making it on his own. Chibs lathers the cloth again and keeps circling over the tense shoulders. All of Juice’s back is knotted up and Chibs presses a little bit firmer onto a spot, dragging a small moan out the man and Chibs stops.

“Keep doing that… Please?”

Tense voice, a little impatient too. Chibs starts rubbing again, just hard enough to make the muscles move under the skin, but not putting any real pressure on them. Juice is leaning forward, almost hanging onto the tub and Chibs knows it’s not good for the man to be up here. That he should be in Stockton, staying with the priest, rest and not getting dragged around.
“You’re still here…”

The words are barely audible, but they reach through the sound of rippling water down Juice’s shoulders to the loop of his pants and Chibs stops what he’s doing and grabs Juice’s hands.

“Look at me, kid. Juicyboy?”
“Huh?”

Christ, it’s freaking Chibs out, the way Juice is pulled in and out of his twisted mind so easily and Chibs isn’t able to spot the signs to stop it. The kid looks up at him though he seems a little startled and Chibs forces himself to smile, to get those confused and scared eyes to calm down again. Juice shivers and all Chibs knows to do is to pull him into a wet hug.

“I’m here, lovey. I’m still here…”

Juice breaths are calm and the tension seems to go down a bit. Chibs grabs the cloth and starts washing his back in slow moves, feeling how Juice relaxes a little more, clearly knowing it’s him and wanting the touch, not just accepting it, despite the frustration of his limitations. Chibs rinses the cloth once, moving it again over the thin back to get rid of the soap, before taking the towel Juice has left on the floor to dry him with.

Chibs has done this kind of helping before with others, only not nearly as broken as Juice. They’ve been swearing or screaming, maybe laughing even and cheered on by brothers surrounding them to take care of the damage. Washing off to be able to make stitches or just get rid of blood – the patient’s own or someone else’s. Chibs is always light on his hand when doing that, despite his harsh words and the jokes, but this time he can only be light, not joke.

It’s hard to watch so much weakness, because it’s the kind that won’t go away with cheering, joking, scolding or harsh pats on the shoulder. You have to be careful, like you’d be with a wee child, a fragile old person or a scared animal. Chibs isn’t used to be that kind of care giver, because he has a tendency of forgetting or at least tuck away moments when he’s shown this side. It doesn’t fit the cut, so to say.

He dries Juice off, soft and careful, first the neck and then his back and arms, the sore chest. He can feel how tired the man is, this position may have been the best for being able to wash himself, but it’s clearly not good for anything else. Chibs sighs.

“Exactly how an’ where did ye manage to have a shower earlier, huh?”

Juice gives a small giggle.

“Used the ewer.”
“The ewer?”
“Venus helped me. Only the hair though.”

Makes sense. Showing yourself naked to anyone in Juice’s state is the last thing Chibs expects the kid to want. He’s fighting, though, really fighting and Chibs can’t help but getting that warm tug in his heart again. All the chaos now is bad enough with the external parts and Chibs can only imagine how bad it is inside Juice’s head. The fact that he made himself do this is a sign of resistance towards that personal hell and that’s good. Really good.

Juice makes an effort to sit straight and looks around before reaching for the small toiletry bag and
grabbing a bottle with lotion. He starts with the upper arms and Chibs wonders if he should move, but the man won’t be able to reach his back and Chibs just takes the bottle, pours out some of the perfume free stuff and rubs it in on the shoulders and back. It’s all knots and Chibs resists the sudden urge to squeeze harder, just rubs a little firmer until Juice moans.

“Jesus…”
“Too hard?”
“Yeah… Don’t think I can sit like this much longer.”

Chibs just hands him the clean tanktop Juice has put on safe distance from the water and the kid puts it on with slow, stiff moves. Finally he’s done and lets out something between a sigh and a small laughter. It’s not happy, just self-ironic.

“Probably stupid, but it’s totally worth it… Not reeking.”

He then removes the plastic from his arms and Chibs grabs his wrists, looking over the swathes.

“Good?”
“Aye.”

They’re completely dry, which is quite impressive, but Chibs still unwraps them just a bit to have a look at the scratches. Juice sighs.

“Haven’t touched them, Chibs… Seriously, man, is this necessary?”

He’s not resisting though, and Chibs looks over the wounds. They’re dry and haven’t gone worse so he remakes the swathes again, sighing too.

“Ye’re gonnae pass out from this, ye muppet.”
“How’s that a bad thing?”
“Because ye shouldn’t knock yerself out. Ye need to rest, lad.”
“Passing out will make it easier. And I’m sick of smelling like a fucking hobo.”
“Didn’t notice.”

Juice laughs as he slowly pulls the clean hoodie over his head.

“That’s because you grew up with carbolic soap and factory discharge, Chibs. Bet you didn’t even use a toothbrush until you were twenty.”
“Fuck ye, kiddo.”

Chibs gives him a very light flip on the backside of his head and Juice laughs again. This time it’s almost, *almost* a happy one.

“Should get ye up now. C’mon.”

He takes the kid’s hands and with combined efforts, they get Juice standing. Chibs holds him lightly until he regains his footing and Juice shivers again.

“I’ll take care of the water later.”

Chibs snorts.
“No, ye don’t. I will, or ye’ll be needin’ a fucking wheelchair. Get to the fire, will ye?”
“Where’s Dyna?”
“Probably on the bed. Just sit down an’ I’ll have a look.”

Juice lets himself be led to the fireplace and Chibs makes a fire. Not that he thinks it’s cold, but Juice does and also, it’s kinda nice with the sound. His knees are cracking a bit when he raises to look for the damn kitten. She’s laying on the bed, napping, and makes a funny little sound when Chibs just lifts her up. He carries her to her knackered but quite pleased daddy and Chibs doesn’t know when exactly he came to like the picture they make.

Home has never been a physical place for Chibs, but a state of mind, a knowledge of where his heart belongs, wherever he may be on a map. As long as he’s been with his brothers or on rare occasions with Fiona and Kerrianne, he’s felt at home. There’s a lot of truth in the saying that home is where your heart is. Homey stuff, furniture and shite… that’s never really reminded Chibs of a home, it’s merely decorations. Nice and all, yes, but not necessary. And it can be taken from you in a way an inner belonging can’t.

That’s why it’s a bit surprising – and worrying – that he genuinely likes this. Not just the peace and quiet, the breather from the world, but the purely physical stuff as well. The cabin paints a picture of calm, of repose and easiness and even if it’s lying, it’s still nice enough for Chibs to let himself be a little bit fooled. Juice is leaning back on him now, using him as a support and that’s just fine, more than fine, actually, because Chibs can feel that he’s really relaxing. The kitten is moving around a bit, but then decides she wants to be in her favourite spot, climbing onto Juice’s lap and curls up to a purring ball.

Chibs swallows. It’s been so long since he learned how to be a man, that he sometimes forgets how it feels to just be human. He’s rarely had the time to just sit with someone like this, or maybe he just never had anyone who made him want it before.

“You’re still here…”

It’s barely a whisper, the kid is almost asleep, but there’s still that trace of fear in his voice Chibs has now learned to see for what it is: PTSD added to the stress from ongoing shit in one hellish cocktail even the most down to Earth, mentally stable and strong person would be severely damaged by. Weakness would be to let it run wild without trying to handle it, to lash out and raise hell, not caring if you destroy everything in your way or use it as an excuse or opportunity to let it out on others, regardless of what they’ve done to deserve it – or not deserved it at all.

He swirls his arms tighter around the man, nuzzling the soft skin by the neck.

“Still here, lil’ darlin’… Jus’ rest, aye? Can sleep in my arms…”

Is this how it feels to let your heart be louder than reason? Crossing the lines of brotherhood, friendship and the form of care that’s acceptable to show? Chibs is oldschool, growing up in a life where having some pussy on the side wasn’t even considered cheating. He never had anyone else when he was still with Fiona, only pretended to, knowing just how much he needed to exaggerate in the company with the boys.

Chibs is well aware that he’s not the only one pretending to be okay with a little something on the side and in later years it’s been less and less of that kind of bragging as the younger generations have been more present in the club, who didn’t live the club life in the 70’s, 80’s or 90’s. Officially it’s still
what happens on the road stays on the road, but most of the guys with wives or girlfriends seem to be content with strip clubs and locker room talk in general. The time when wives and crows stayed far away from each other to avoid cat fights are gone and Chibs, although he’s never had to care about that particular kind of delicacy himself, doesn’t miss it.

The lasses hanging around the club these days are wives, girlfriends and business associates. Hookers, sure, but no one hurts Venus’ girls – or boys – unpunished and Tig’s old lady isn’t only accepted but respected and once people get to know her, very well liked. She’s ruling with kindness in a way Gemma never could, and it works. On the rare occasions it doesn’t, Tig will step in and make it very clear what he feels about people being rude to his old lady. Also, he doesn’t engage with hookers anymore and no one bats an eye. Just five years ago, that would’ve been impossible. Chibs himself hasn’t had sex in weeks and it bothers him that it doesn’t bother him more. He’s not gay, he didn’t suddenly stop like pussy or stop having needs just because he has a fucked up form of connection with Juice he can’t put a suitable name on.

The lad sleeps now, even breaths, the body a solid weight on Chibs. Juice may be skinny, tarnished and fucking exhausted, but he’s not withering away anymore. There’s still life in that stupid head, still some strength even if the kid himself may not feel it. Chibs does and that’s why he’s not carrying Juice back to bed or tucks him down on the sofa. He wants to hold the man, needs to God damnit, and Chibs needs no reason to explain that to him, not really, because on some level he’s slowly beginning to, maybe not accept but at least admit it. He’s in love with Juice, has been for years and as with the love for the club, it’s simply just been there, not needing any conscious thoughts or attention to keep going.

The wound caused by the treason went so deep, the only thing Chibs was able to do, was to leave it be, not scratching it but simply carry on with the ache, waiting for it to heal with time. But it didn’t. It just kept aching, worrying his heart and when Juice came back… well, it wasn’t reason that drove Chibs to wait by his door and the wound was torn up again, as bad as the first time.

Bobby once said the club needed healing and he was right. That’s what Chibs and the others have been doing for the last three years and they’ve managed better than anyone imagined, considering the chaos they started from. In a way, Juice is the last living trace of what caused that chaos and maybe Chibs shouldn’t forgive, shouldn’t care or give in to this, but every choice he’s made since putting the cut on for the first time, has been for the club. He’s put his own personal feelings aside a thousand times for the benefit of the patch, has sacrificed so much to keep others families safe and whole. That’s why his brothers accept his need to not only not harming Juice, but to help him. Because he’s been there for them countless times, not once giving them cause to distrust him or question his loyalty or commitment.

Sitting here with Juice, is healing for Chibs. A safe place away from questioning, judging or even harmful eyes. Right now, Chibs can’t even see his own, no reflection to show his own inner chaos to him. There’s just himself, his thoughts and the weight of his heart sleeping heavily but peaceful in his arms.
“He’s outside.”

Tig’s eyes have always been impossible for Juice to read and the man, despite club decisions, assurances from Venus and Chibs, is still hard to face. He can never tell what those light blue, almost greyish eyes are really seeing, since they always seem either disgusted or amused by just about everything apart from Venus. The look he has when seeing her, is pure adoration, nothing less and it’s impossible for the man to hide. While looking at Juice, Tig simply seems… neutral – and not very interested in talking.

Juice just nods and leaves the fireplace and Tig, who’s sitting there with Mina, to go outside. Venus seems to be on an errand of some sort. It’s late in the afternoon, sun’s low and the wood reminds of running away, of escape, numbness from cold and that fear…

“Hey, darlin’…”

So casual. The Scottish accent, the way Chibs makes strong words seem so easy to speak. In a way, it irks Juice. That easiness with something that’s anything but easy for any of them. He smiles.

“Hey, baby.”

He sounds a bit teasing, not really with the purpose to taunt the man, but just to catch his attention. It works. Chibs raises his eyebrows and Juice sits down next to him at the front porch. The man offers him a smoke and they just remain like that for a while, until half of Juice’s cigarette is finished.

“How long did I sleep?”

“Few hours. Any nightmares?”

Juice shakes his head.

“Nah. No dreams at all. Thanks for the help with... you know…”

The bath. The talking. The fire… everything…

“Ye’re welcome.”

“You need to leave soon?”

“Tired of me?”

More teasing. Juice just shrugs, Chibs knows what he’s meaning and there’s the smile. The one that’s just so much Chibs, not colored by anything special, just his close-mouthed smile that makes the scars look more like beauty marks than signs of a violent life.

“Have no other urgent appointments today.”

“Left Chucky in charge?”

Now Chibs chuckles.

“Honestly, we’d be out of business without him.”

“Chucky? That Chucky?”
“Given some time an’ patience, he turned out to be quite the little helper. People forget tha’ eejits have ears an’ this one has a pretty good memory too.”
“He’s spying for you?”
“Oh, wouldn’t call it tha’. Lets just say he’s keepin’ ‘is eyes an’ ears open. An’ he loves Venus, which seems to make ‘im do less stupid shite less often.”
“Guess she’s a bit easier to be around than Gemma…”

Chibs just hums and Juice blows some smoke out.

“Sorry. Shouldn’t talk about her.”
“Why?”

Juice shrugs.

“What’s the point? You have your picture of her, Chibs, and I don’t want to ruin it with my shit.”
“Believe me, lad. That woman managed that just fine on her own.”
“You still love her.”

He’s not accusing, or asking. Just pointing out the obvious and Chibs stares out in the dusk, nodding.

“Aye. Love’em all… Always will.”

Present form, no names, but Juice still knows. Chibs knows that he does. A small twitch in the scarred face, eyes looking away, the end of the almost finished cigarette glowing in the darkness.

“But I love ye more.”
Chapter 42

It’s a good thing that Juice doesn’t answer. The man looks like he could be thrown off his feet by the slightest step or word, either from Chibs or himself. Chibs is looking out at the woods. The one thing he never liked about California is the lack of twilight. It goes dark so fast you can never enjoy the soft moving from day to night as in Scotland or Ireland and the darkness still, after all these years, tricks Chibs to think it’s later than it is.

The sound of a car makes the kid startle and Chibs glances at the small road.

“Relax. T’is just Venus.”

Indeed it is, driving in her rent, black Yaris. She’s a person you can’t miss on the street, but her vehicle of choice when she’s on her private errands is one of the most common ones in the state and by that far more difficult to track. Discretion, as she says, isn’t cheap but that doesn’t mean it’s showing.

She parks the car and comes out suprisingly stable despite high heels on forest ground and gives an little wave.

“Salutations, gentlemen! Filip, dear, will you help a girl with the bags?”

“Sure, sweetheart.”

He’s not even thinking about it. The pet name. Venus, like most women, simply makes Chibs form pet names naturally. Sweetheart. Darling. Love. It’s a thirty year old habit that, like smoking or drinking, is pretty much impossible to quit. They change slightly when it’s his woman, turn to m’eudail, Scottish Gaelic for my dear, or mo leannan, my sweetheart, with the emphasis on my. He called Kerrianne a leanbh, little one, or, when she was a brave lass and didn’t cry, a sheòid, my hero. Nowadays she’s mostly my girl or my lass, Chibs isn’t sure why he keeps alternating between girl and lass, just as with boy and lad.

The grocery bags are filled with something that will be dinner tonight, an already cooked steak of some sort and it reminds Chibs of the days when the youngest prospects used to be Gemma’s little helpers with these things. Usually they only groused once, before they’d had a taste of her roast beef. Venus isn’t Gemma and certainly doesn’t try to be her, but her cooking is fantastic. She puts her little handbag, sunglasses and hat on the table and starts pulling her rings off.

“Just put it all here, Filip. Where oh where is…? Oh, there it is!”

She’s taking out a pot and some kitchen tools – Chibs realises she must’ve filled the place with them herself because Piney sure as hell didn’t – and puts a little apron on. Chibs isn’t needed here now, especially not with Tig looking like he’s seeing an angel, walking over to the kitchen. Chibs hurries out because accepting and loving his friend and his old lady/old man is one thing and intruding on their sappiness a whole other that Chibs isn’t the slightest comfortable with.

Juice isn’t on the frontporch and Chibs is just about to panic when he sees the man coming from the corner of the house with Dyna on his shoulder. He smiles a little.

“Had to look for her.”
There’s a wild glimpse in his eyes, haunted, and he’s holding the kitten like she’s his most precious thing. Which she probably is. If someone’s trying anything with her, Juice will tear the world apart with his bare hands, that’s something Chibs isn’t doubting in the slightest. And ironically, the one who’d understand that better than anyone, is Tig.

Juice sits down on the staircase again, the kitten climbing on his shoulder. The little creature sort of helps with the strange seriousness of the situation and Chibs sinks down too, not too close because he’s honestly not sure what Juice wants right now. What he can handle, what he’s thinking or feeling. The thin face is hard from tensing muscles, eyes staring right forward into nothing and a part of Chibs is confused, because the man already knows. It’s not the first time Chibs has told him that particular truth. Well, maybe not formed exactly like this, but… Chibs can’t really stand the silence but he can’t walk away now, so he just moves a little further away on the staircase.

“Don’t.”

The voice is very calm, too much so and Chibs feels Juice’s callous hand grabbing his own. Pulling him closer, squeezing it almost to the point of hurting.

Chibs strokes the knuckles with his thumb. It comes natural, like the pet names. The past can’t be changed but Chibs wonders what could’ve been had he been able to give the lad that promise before the suicide attempt, before the betrayal, before… Before all the shite none of them can make undone now. Juice is tensing again, breaths going a little faster but Chibs waits.

“Are you sure?”

The question is not expected, the hard, incredulous voice would at any other time make Chibs feel accused and hurt but he’s learned his lesson, at least he’s done his fucking homework, and the price for having the openness he once thought Juice could give him as easily as Chibs would, got wounded when he didn’t, is high. The walls the man has built around his heart aren’t visible, but thick and high, and it hurts like hell to run into them.

“Yes.”

The fact that he can’t even use the Scottish word, says more than the lump in his throat, the curling weight in his stomach, the free fist he’s clenching. He still doesn’t understand it, it fucks with his mind and heart and everything he thought he knew about himself. It’s terrifying, bewildering and just not what a soon to be fifty, up until now very heterosexual biker with a strict and unforgiving attitude towards traitors and cowards, is supposed to see coming. The long years of unnamed feelings for Juice haven’t made them any less strong and the only way Chibs has been able to manage them, has been by keeping them safely locked away from both others and himself.

In a way it’s been three years of mourning. More than three, because a part of him was in grief long before Juice drove off to Stockton. The part he’s been so careful not to stir up, touch or even look at, that would make his heart skip a beat, his stomach twitch and throat go mysteriously dry whenever the awkward kid let him see his real smile. A grief of the kind that just wont fade with time, reason and distance aren’t helping, nothing is because death is one thing, Chibs can accept that kind of grief, but the loss of Juice had been… just so completely unnecessary and twisted. So much love and emotional investment in vain. That’s what it felt like, loosing him. Chibs still doesn’t know what he’d done that day by the diner, had he followed Juice out. He doesn’t want to know, every answer would just make the wound deeper.

Juice’s grip is a vice around his fingers, the only thing that prevents Chibs from running away.
Literally. He’s never felt so completely naked, so torn open with anyone before and it’s agony to wait for an answer, but that’s all he can do.

“That’s why you wouldn’t look at me… when I left… Why you couldn’t shoot me… Why you cried when you found me…”

By the tree. Yes. Yes, that’s why. Chibs can’t answer, not with words. Juice’s voice is so soft now, still incredulous, but more like he’s accepting not only what Chibs is saying, but what he isn’t. Like another piece of that hellish puzzle that is Juice’s road to ruin is put into place, making the pattern of what could’ve been so horrifyingly clear.

“You mean… all this time…?”
“Yes…”

He forms it, there’s some kind of sound coming out, at least his lips are moving. It’s not right of him to let his own emotions brim over like this, not in the current situation. But Filip Telford has never been able to leave that moment behind him, never been forced to physically turn his back to someone to stop himself from crying and causing a scene except with this man.

“And all this time…”

Juice sounds painfully calm, but he’s still squeezing Chibs’ hand.

“All this time I thought it was just me… going completely crazy…”
Chapter 43

It’s often like this, Juice has noticed over the years. Big truths, big secrets, once out in the open become sort of an anticlimax. Thoughts and feelings, words long since choked and buried sounding so much smaller, insignificant, than when you’re hiding them. Perhaps you’re just fooled by the art. Movies and images, stories about relationships where truths suddenly changes everything, revelations making people see the light, the bigger picture or just another layer of someone they thought they knew.

Painted like that, it’s quite satisfying. Seeing someone struggle for an hour and a half or two, fuck shit up but come out on the other side more whole and real. Kisses, forgiveness, maybe not completely but a new beginning is always indicated, a glimpse of a promising future where the main characters leave the screen stronger and wiser. Scarred, yes, struggling and with losses behind them, but never alone. Never that slow, uncertain, grey and just fucking hopeless way to redemption where the few glimpses of hope are messy and worrying, the struggle mostly invisible and the gestures and words unsatisfying because you’re not dead until you’re fucking dead and only then it’s most definitely too late.

That’s not how it feels now and honestly, Juice doesn’t know if he expected anything at all and if he did, what it was. He just feels tired and by the look of Chibs, the Scot does too. All they do now, is holding hands, like clutching onto an item of some sort. Anything to keep them grounded and Juice knows it’s now he should say it too. Should answer the man who indeed loves the Reaper and the chosen family bearing that mark, but for reasons he probably can’t explain, loves the one who betrayed that mark more.

But he can’t. He’s not capable of forming an answer, not with words nor with anything else. He just clamps onto the hand that once took the rings off that other hand to beat him up and then stitched him back together. This isn’t a brotherly love confession and Chibs is shit scared too, which just makes it more difficult to even try to talk. Juice tries to breathe, but the air isn’t going all the way down and he’s still lost for words, the answer forgotten somewhere and he can’t find it. His mouth opens but there’s no sound, just air coming out, too little of it pulled down. Chibs’ brown eyes are worried, but soft, and he’s not let go of Juice’s hands.

“Juicyboy…”

Exhale. Inhale. Juice bends his head down to their swirled fists, resting it on hard knuckles, smelling from tobacco and engine grease.

“Please, say something, lad…”

There’s something tormenting in Chibs’ voice and still Juice has no words, they’re all trapped if not lost somewhere and all he can do is opening and shutting his mouth like a fish tossed up on land, breathing over their hands.

Love’em all, always will. But I love ye more.

You don’t get so hurt you have to turn away when a traitor leaves, because of your love for the patch. The Reaper wants it all, everything you are, everything you love, live and breathe for. In the end, Chibs couldn’t give it all. The perhaps most loyal of them all, the one who never let his heart or desires come in the way for the patch, is more or less pissing on the cut, unintentionally as it is.
Maybe for the first time, Juice thinks, does the man understand what it’s like when you have to choose between loosing and loosing.

“Hold me.”

His voice is somehow both small and thick. He’s begging, but so is Chibs, right? The arm comes around him and Juice leans into it. They’re not fags, right? Just because Juice hasn’t been near a girl in years, barely even gotten himself off, the libido gone with all the other signs of life, it doesn’t mean he’s gay. If he’d dared to look deeper, not been so utterly ashamed of everything he was, everything he did, he might have seen his own pain, slowly turning into paralyzing numbness, for what it was.

But Sons aren’t gay, any more than they’re ratting or killing themselves. These ideas, the ideals of what you are and not have been following Juice for his entire life, long before the Sons. Be a man, don’t be a pussy, stay strong, don’t cry, don’t show yourself weak, don’t feel too much, get up, bleed for it and brush it off… If you have any tears to spill, you do it when you’re literally standing over your best friend’s, old lady’s or kid’s dead body. Otherwise, you take whatever magic little pills you need to not feel too much, make a wicked grin and get back on your feet, pretending those cheering pats on the back aren’t making the bruises ache.

He still can’t speak and a frustrated whimper leaves him, makes him fear loosing the moment, that Chibs will hear a rejection or worse, the kind of weakness that makes him regret those words. Juice’s vision is getting blurred, chest too tight and not from the now healed pneumonia. He can feel his lower lip tremble, his entire body just stiffening and when that hand is travelling up to his hair, rough fingers tangling softly in it, his aching muscles finally remember they’re alive.

It’s too late to try and make it any less awkward and even if it wasn’t, Juice wouldn’t know how. All he’s able to do, is cry. Cry like a little kid in Chibs’ arms, sobs racking through his since years neglected carcass.

*Love’em all, always will. But I love ye more.*

He doesn’t deserve it. He’s hurt the man too much and the whole extent of the treason he never meant to commit, is flooding over him. You don’t love a traitor, and yet, isn’t that why he’s sitting here? Because Juice Ortiz wants what he doesn’t deserve, what he can’t have but still can’t help but wanting, being drawn to, laying himself bare for.

He never meant to hurt the club or the man. All he ever wanted was to be loved and anything threatening to take that love away, being it a cop knowing his old man is black or the unfortunate walking in on the pres’ mom standing over his old lady’s corpse, his mind will turn to the first and most effective weapons he learned to use: running and hiding. Words or tears were never weapons, unless used against him.

*Love’em all, always will. But I love ye more.*

“I’m sorry…”

Finally, he’s able to speak.

“I’m so sorry, Chibs… So sorry… For everything…”

Like a broken record, he’s repeating the same words, over and over again, feeling that hand in his
hair, the soft grip around his torso, careful not to cause pressure on any wounds the clothes are concealing.

And Chibs lets him. He sits patiently, allowing Juice to hang onto him like a sobbing ragdoll. The guilt is pouring out of Juice’s skin, like mental steam, he’s not in control of his body in the least and Chibs just waits. When Juice is nothing but a messy pile of cried out flesh in his arms, when the words, tears and hiccups are finally turning into soft, quiet sniffles, what’s left isn’t a hollow emptiness in his chest, but something warm and living. Too exhausted to show, just laying inside him like a resting, slow softness, silently accompanied by Chibs’ lips resting against his throat. And Juice sighs it, the answer he’s already given with everything but the actual words, barely a whisper drenched in exhaustion.

“Love you too… So much…”
Normally, Chibs would’ve shoveled down the food in lightning speed. He’s not had lunch and the stress from the last days is literally making him dizzy, not to mention Venus’ dinner is delicious. Thing is, he’s a little… lost. For words, for the world, to be honest. Him and Juice may both have cleaned up a bit from the moment on the staircase and even though anyone would be a little emotionally fragile after something like that, Chibs finds himself just acting strange.

Venus, the guardian angel of awkward social situations as she is, is talking of course. About food in general, Mina and Dyna, the weather and Juice seems to be holding up pretty okay. Eating slowly and not very much, but that’s expected, with the lack of appetite the kid has. It’s a bit strange seeing him like this though. In this almost everyday like situation by an dinner table, getting small pieces of steak and mash on his fork, taking a long time to chew and swallow. Tig, as always, eats like there’s no tomorrow and occasionally gives Mina treats despite Venus’ looks.

They make up a domestic picture and Chibs isn’t sure if he likes it. Family dinners to him, are connected with Gemma and Clay, with Jax and Opie laughing by the table, Juice and Ratboy teasing each other and Luann talking to Piney, just that sense of peace and stability, of true family that Chibs hasn’t felt again. False as it was, he’s never gotten that feeling of togetherness since then, just too many seats empty, too many bonds not only broken but swept away. Donna, Tara… Bobby. So many of them gone now, dead and buried, in most cases all too early and for all the wrong fucking reasons. Juice would’ve too if… Chibs cuts that thought off. Not only is it completely useless to dwell on it, but it’s making him miserable too. Juice may have been the only one by this table to have seen and heard his little love confession, but Chibs still feels like it’s showing.

Perhaps it’s just him being a little paranoid, but the red eyes, the gaze Juice is keeping firmly on his plate and the way his wrapped up arm is pushing the food around more than putting it in his mouth, isn’t a very calming view. It’s only showing how tired, thin and worn out the man is. A mutual love confession doesn’t change that and Chibs may be a Catholic, but he’s never believed in miracles. Speaking of Catholics, the priest should be contacted. Juice needs to give him a call, in case the man thinks Chibs has lied to him and decides to involve the cops. And tomorrow, Chibs has to get his ass back to the club, catching up with T.O. If there’d been anything urgent, he would’ve called, but Chibs’ phone is unusually silent, meaning T.O., unlike Chibs, has things under control.

“Just put it in your mouth.”

Tig’s annoyed voice is cutting through the soft silence and Juice jumps a little, dropping the fork on the plate. He looks startled, scared and Chibs is just about to bite back at the VP when the lad looks up.

“That’s what he said.”

It’s the lamest joke ever, but the next second, all four of them are laughing. Tig rarely laughs, Juice wasn’t one to do that very often even in the good days, but it’s just such a bizarre situation and the last days have been a fucking roller coaster in so many ways, maybe it’s the only thing you can do. Venus puts her napkin against her lips.

“Dirty boy… Well, at least you’re not speaking with your mouth full, unlike some of my girls.”

By this point, Juice is shaking with laughter, making a futile attempt to take another mouthful, but
has to put the fork down again.

“I’m sorry, Venus, it’s delicious, but…”
“Oh, stop it, sweetheart.”

Venus just waves a little at him, smiling.

“One step at the time, darling. And Alexander, stop being so scary.”
“What did I do?”

The man who knows she’s a woman, just gives him a look and Tig puts his hands up in defeat. Venus sure as hell has the VP wrapped around her not so little finger. It’s fascinating and a little scary to watch, Chibs thinks, because it’s such an obvious sign of how hard Tig fell for her. The adoration has never stopped showing, Tig seems unable to keep it hidden and the whole club is used to it by now, accepting it because it’s so clear what a good influence Venus is. Not just on Tig, but the entire club. She’s not interested in using her power or position to make people fear, but adore her and it mostly works way better than you’d expect in an MC club. Probably because she knows men and their desires and weaknesses better than any woman. With her, Chibs is fairly certain Tig can be himself, be whole in a way he never could be with anyone else and that makes the VP a lot less likely to do fucked up shit just because he can. Just one of many reasons why everyone at the Samcro table are aware of just how much they all benefit from Venus’ presence.

Juice takes another bite, half the size of the previous one and that seems to go a little easier. Chibs follows his move, almost forgetting his own food and then, when the kid looks up, Chibs dives down in his plate again, neck flushed. It’s fucking embarrassing the way he stares at him but Tig and Venus don’t seem to care. At least they don’t show if they do. The only thing betraying they’ve noticed, is Tig’s quick glance, gone in an instance but it’s not a disapproving, judging or even teasing one.

Venus talks about her day, about the costume made high heels that arrived this morning, about one of her girls who mistook sea salt for crank, ending up with nose bleeding and “I’ll tell you that, gentlemen, it wasn’t a pretty sight”.

“She didn’t feed it to a dog, right?”

Tig, of course, and Chibs remembers the occasion when Juice decided that crank was a good thing to sedate dobermanns with. Juice is blushing even more now, giving half a smile and Venus raises her eyebrows.

“Am I missing something here, Tiger?”
“Ancient history, baby. Just ancient history.”
“About the time when more people got a piece of Tig’s arse.”

The VP snorts at Chibs’ comment and finishes his plate. Venus, as always so ladylike, wipes her mouth with a little napkin.

“Dessert, anyone?”

She takes the empty plates – and Juice’s still two third full one – and raises. Chibs pats her arm.

“Ye spoil us all, darling.”
“That’s why God sent me here, Filip.”
That, if Chibs believed in such things as specific purposes from God to a specific human, would be the truth. He raises to help her clear the table and then she serves up an apple pie. Tig takes her hand, patting it affectionately.

“Apples again, baby? Thought you planned on cherry.”
“Change of plans, Tiger.”

A small sound next to him, barely audible, makes Chibs turn. Juice is clutching his hoodie, eyes wide and far, far gone, staring without looking and his face has almost turned green. Chibs tries to catch his gaze.

“Juice?”

No answer, just that panic stricken look and Chibs knows the man is lost in a memory of some sort, and not the good kind. But now Chibs knows a little more, not many details but the bigger picture and he doesn’t need to know exactly why a cherry pie triggered something, only that it somehow did. Chibs gives first Venus, then the pie and then Venus again, a look. The man who knows he’s woman quickly takes away the poor, innocent dessert and then pats Tig’s shoulder.

“Lets go outside for a minute, babe.”
“Why? What’s…?”
“Now, Tiger.”
“Of… course, baby…”

Tig follows his old lady outside, taking Mina with him too and closes the door. Once they’re gone, Chibs sinks down by Juice’s chair, not daring to hoover over him in any way. PTSD sure as hell is a bitch and Chibs looks around the cabin, spotting the damn on the floor and he calls on her, making ridiculous sounds to have her coming over. It takes a little while and Juice is still sitting rigidly with breaths so strained it sound like he’s about to hyperventilate, but the creature comes forth and Chibs scoops her up, placing her on Juice’s lap.

The little kitten immediately starts kneading and at least Juice doesn’t get scared or seem to see something else. Chibs swallows.

“Juicyboy? I’m gonnae get ye yer meds, alright? Know where ye are?”

No answer and Chibs’ heart drops. He raises very slowly, walking backwards to the bedroom in order to keep an eye on the lad. Luckily, the benzos are easily found in the small toiletry bag in Juice’s backpack and Chibs takes the prescribed dosage back to the table. He lowers again, holding up the white pills of wonder in his palm.

“Juicy? C’mon, look at me, little darlin’…”
“Chibbie?”
“Aye. T’is me, laddie.”

Chibs can almost see how the different realities collides in the lad’s head, how he’s trying to stay where he physically is and not being dragged away to wherever that fucking cherry pie lead him. Chibs doesn’t know what Juice is feeling, he just tries to follow where the broken thoughts and memories are leading them. Not argue, not ask too many questions, just offering whatever comfort he’s able to give and let the lad decide what to take.
“C’mon, lovey… S’alright, nothing bad’s happening… Ye reckognize me, mo chridhe?”

It takes time, it’s gonna take a long fucking time, this shite Juice is struggling with, and Chibs is painfully aware of the odds to heal well enough from these kind of wounds to live and not just survive. Juice is exhausted, physically and mentally, and all the sudden changes are wearing him down. Pies, with or without cherry, will be banned from the cabin from now on.

“Juicyboy? Gonnae take yer meds, darlin’? Make ye feel a little better?”

A small nod and Juice brings Chibs’ hand to his mouth, simply licking them up from his palm and that’s just as well because he’s not stable with his fingers now. Chibs holds the gass of water to his lips and one, two, three small sips and the pills are gone. Within fifteen-twenty minutes or so, there will be some respite again and Chibs strokes the man’s cheek.

“Don’ worry, lovey. Gonnae take good care o’ye. Stayin’ with ye, alright?”

“Kay…”

A bleak shade of a smile, miniscule glimpse of life again and Chibs is beyond fucked, because it makes him so relieved he almost cries. Why did this happen to him? How did he change? When did his feelings decide to just run wild and allow this kind of insane longing to see this shipwreck of a man smile again? The Reaper is angry. Royally fucking pissed and his scythe and cloak moving dangerously close to Chibs’ heart and mind.

_Traitor. Snitch. Rat._ Chibs just shuts his ears and raises to let Juice lean onto him. He folds his arms around the rock hard shoulders and the lad sighs against his neck. At first Chibs thinks he’s about to say something, but then he just buries himself into Chibs’ skin and all there is to do, is holding the man, waiting for the right moment to start talking and once again, Chibs wonders if there’s ever a right moment for the kind of nightmares that Juice carries around, to come out in the light.
Chapter 45

It’s a bizarre kind of freedom in being weak. Juice is laying in Chibs’ arms, tired as hell but unable to sleep. Or maybe he just doesn’t want to. Feeling Chibs’ arms around him, the gentle spooning from that aging body is so soothing. They’re both still dressed, only hoodies and shirts are gone and Juice is grateful for that. It’s a closeness that doesn’t demand anything, no naked skin or the opposite, hiding of it in extra layers.

The panic attack earlier was a bad one, but he managed to keep it under control. Got the meds early enough to prevent the worst outcome of it. No new scratches on his skin. No markings around his neck. No one to call him coward or weak, even if he might just that. Juice has never felt this kind of comfort with anyone in any situation. The closest to someone else than Chibs spooning him like this, would be Tully and that’s a sickening thought.

With girls, Juice of course has always been the big spoon, even if he honestly didn’t engage in this kind of intimacy with many chicks over the years. Sex, sure, but cuddling? Crow eaters aren’t cuddly and Juice never really had a real girlfriend. Hook-ups in his own or some chick’s bed, but nothing more than that. Gemma teased him about being gay, which was obviously one of her sassy jokes, and Juice didn’t think twice about it. He’s never been sensitive with that, unlike some guys that can really snap and beat people to a pulp for even the most innocent joke they believe threatens their manliness. Juice sighs. Most people have no idea and will never know how true loss of power feels like. How you, once the initial shock of the horror is over and you know that your best chance of survival is to just stay put and try to shut off as much of yourself as possible, is just laying there, taking the abuse rather than risking a futile attempt to fight back. The way your mind is screaming, crying in silence while your mouth is shut and the only echo of it, is inside your brain.

Tully only took over where Jax left. Not in the same way, of course, but when the nazi had loosened him up enough to pound into him easily, groaning and just taking what Samcro had offered him, Juice still heard, saw and felt Jax in the rapist’s place. He knew that Jax allowed it, that he didn’t care in the least, even if he didn’t knew about Juice’s part in covering up Tara’s murder at the time. Maybe that was part of the numbness starting to creep up on him. Knowing that Jax thought about him as nothing but a means to an end, even without knowing about that hideous transgression.

In hindsight, Juice isn’t sure if he would’ve told him about Tara’s murder earlier, even when provided with the opportunity to change the past. The bond between Jax and Tara was never even close to the bond between Jax and Gemma. Blood is thicker than water, after all, and the love of a mother can be deadly. Not that Juice would know. His own wasn’t really a bad one, she did what she could and considering his own bad judgement, Juice doesn’t think he’s the right person to blame Emilia Ortiz. She was desperate for something better, anything that would make it easier for her to take care of Juan Carlos and Brian Parks never showed her his ugliest sides. Hiding shit is a deep-seated habit Juice learned long before he even came close to a bike for the first time – and Gemma was a pro.

“Ye’re thinkin’ too loud again…”

Chibs’ voice is low and soft, merely a murmur in Juice’s hair.

“Can’t really help it, Chibbie.”
“What’s goin’ on in tha’ head o’yers, lad?”
Juice sighs, feeling the other man’s hand moving in light circles over his belly. It’s a comforting touch, one that still is very new to him. It’s the way you touch a lover or a partner, not your friend or some fuck buddy. Certainly not a brother. Juice isn’t filled out like before, his abs can’t hide the fact that he’s skinny and the veins aren’t visible in his arms like before.

He’s done everything automatically since he woke up in the hospital ward after the failed stabbing. Rising, washing, dressing, making his bed. Accepting being moved to Tully’s cell, stepping in front of him out for meals, because no shot caller would leave his back free to even a punk if there’s the slightest chance for an attack. No, Juice would walk with Tully behind him, strangely enough almost comforting since it left less room for anyone else to attack him. Not that it really mattered, but better the devil you know, right?

He ate, chewed and swallowed, only spoke when spoken to, fell into the routine and that meant exercise as well. Falling in line, even if it felt like a joke to maintain a body that wasn’t supposed to even be above ground anymore, was the easiest way to not draw attention from other people. Being left alone meant less risk to end up doing more fucked up mistakes. It also sent some kind of signal to the other cons that he wasn’t a complete whimp who could be easily overpowered. Not that anyone tried to get a piece of Tully’s bitch. Angering the Aryan shot caller, especially over a worthless punk, was an extremely stupid idea and those few who didn’t understand that immediately, sure as hell did when they realised that a wolf whistle, pinching Juice’s ass or insinuating that Tully could share his goods for favors, were punishable actions.

It’s so fucked up, the way Juice came to think of Tully as a protector against everyone, even Juice himself. It was a lot harder for the thoughts to run wild when the nazi kept him company. There weren’t any secrets left to cover, at least none that mattered, and maybe that’s why it was almost a relief sometimes. As sickening as it seems, Tully’s way of looking out for him when he didn’t rape him, was comforting. It preserved what little sense Juice had left of being human. That his ears could be filled with more than secrets, schemes and shame. The most painful thoughts and feelings got pushed aside for a moment, when Juice could just follow Tully’s voice or touches.

The company. The touches. The words. All of it so disgusting, the context of the comfort so awful but it was all Juice had and he’d been so sure he wouldn’t live much longer. That either Samcro or the Aryans would finish him off once Tully got tired. Being alive now wasn’t part of the deal. Being in love? Laughable. Being loved? Fubar. The only one visiting his gravestone should be the beadle, and only to remove the weed. The only company, since the club came for Opie’s and Otto’s bodies, being Clay.

But the prison doc was too close, found Juice too quick and unmade the first decision Juice had felt was his own in a very long time. He’d been sure that Tully would tell the club he went out with dignity and that had made him peaceful that day. He may had lived like a coward, but he’d met his end without acting like a kicked puppy begging for mercy. When he woke up at the ward with stiches, swathes and unable to talk, swallow or even breathe properly without the oxygen mask, his wrist cuffed to the bed, the sense of failure became too much and from that day, he just zoned out emotionally. The Reaper had rejected him in literally every possible way and when you’re not even good enough for death itself, you really are nothing.

“Juicyboy? Look at me, kiddo.”

Juice finally comes back to the room, the bed and the embrace. Chibs is still holding him and Juice turns around to face the man, putting his own hand on the small of Chibs’ back. He’s beautiful, Juice notices again, and if his own body wasn’t affected by drugs and years of depression, Juice knows it would respond to the embrace the same way it once did with women.
“Ye alright?”

The only answer Juice would give to that question earlier, is “sure” or “of course”, but he’s so done with lying it doesn’t come natural anymore. He snakes a hand under Chibs’ wifebeater, touching the warm skin underneath and Chibs still pets him in the darkness. The meds prevent Juice’s mind from shaping the usual reaction, at least they slow it down a lot. He sighs.

“No. I’m not alright.”

He’s broken, has been running on the last fuel steams he got left and every new panic attack, nightmare or memory assaulting his mind, every change being it a good or bad one, is grinding him down a little more. They’re cutting him up in pieces, leaving a trail of lost parts behind every step he’s taking and although he knows what he’s leaving, he doesn’t know where he’s heading. The only landmark is Chibs and he’s not a fixed spot. He moves too.

“I’m so tired, Chibs. Of running away, hiding. Of myself. I’m not even sure what I’m trying to fix, man. Nothing makes sense.”

“I know. Aint gonnae tell ye I understand how ye feel, ’cause I don’t. But I understand that ye’re feelin’ a lot of shite. I’m a bit confused myself, kiddo.”

“You mean you didn’t plan on this?”

His sarcastic comment just makes Chibs smile and the man strokes a finger along Juice’s collar bones, down the dimple under his throat where the pendant from padre Mark rests. It’s picturing St. Rita, the patron saint of impossible causes and it’s just a little too suitable. Chibs’ hand keeps wandering, following collar bone back to Juice’s chest, down his ribs and the waistline to the hipbone. He’s tracing a pattern, like he’s trying to find out where it’s safe to travel.

It’s probably not a good idea, but Juice leans closer to kiss the man. Chibs’ mouth and hands make Juice’s mind slow down, turn a little more quiet by the minute he’s touching him. It's almost innocent at first, Chibs seemingly unwilling to rush anything in any way. Just slow pets avoiding ass and groin, staying safely where they’re less likely to trigger something. The self-hatred and PTSD are strong, but in this moment, they’re slowly loosing the battle against the combined forces of Juice’s longing for touch and Chibs’ offering of it. They might still win the war, but Juice guesses you have to take your victories where you can find them and he puts his own leg over Chibs’, getting the man’s thigh pressed between his own.

Chibs doesn’t stop him, on the contrary he pulls Juice closer, kisses him and strokes up and down his back. The man’s soft cock is hardering fast under the straining fabrics of his jeans and the slow grinding from his thigh is making Juice hard as well. The pressure is damn near perfect, the shape of Chibs’ cock rubbing against him making Juice want more and he pushes Chibs down on his back, laying down between his legs before the man can get confused. The hesitation only lasts a moment and then Chibs simply widens himself to let Juice fall into place and swirls his legs around him.

Rubbing dicks might be the gayest thing Juice has ever done, because it leaves no room for roles. You’re not silently accepting cock up your ass to avoid worse damage, or taking a more or less willing hole that will do until you can have real pussy again. The feeling of Chibs’ cock, the movement to meet Juice’s own thrusts, the way he squeezes Juice’s ass and pressing him closer is just… entirely something else. Chibs digs his fingers deeper, almost slipping down the cleft and Juice moans.

“Can’t… can’t do anything more than…”
Can’t let you fuck me because I don’t know if I’ll be able to know it’s you or be sure it’s not gonna hurt.

Juice has never had anything up his ass freely. It’s only ever been anything from unbearably painful to physically painless almost to the point of acceptable in a situation he couldn’t escape. His body learned that Tully wasn’t interested in hurting him physically and relaxed simply because it made it easier to shut off. His body, though, would sometimes betray him and the nerve ends Tully hit reacted without Juice’s consent. The mental pain always hit afterwards. Chibs strokes his back again, but avoids his ass.

“Ye don’t have to. We don’t have to do anything ye don’t want to, Juice. I like this just fine.”
“Like it too.”

A lot, actually. Juice leans down to kiss Chibs again, making a small but determined movement with his hips and he can feel how the Scot is actually shivering a bit from it, or maybe they both are. It’s the good kind of shudder, one of lust and wanting and Juice has never felt wanted before, just a human cumrag that will do until something better shows up. Easily picked up, just as easily left on the floor.

Chibs squeezes a hand between them, grabbing Juice’s bulge outside the pants, cupping his cock really and it feels good, more than good. He’s nibbling at Juice lower lip, making him moan again and it all sends small joggles through his body, pushing at all the right buttons, every touch skilled and keen. Juice is rubbing up against him, jerking onto the hand as he keeps kissing him sore, the scraping teeth and warm tongue, alongside the grinding causing his cock to twitch and leak. He can’t remember the last time he was this hard and if he could, he wouldn’t want to get lost in that memory.

There’s an almost desperate feeling, an intoxication without drugs or booze, the way his blood is rushing and throbbing. Juice feels alive and it’s like tripping, all the usually numb senses becoming alert and hyper aware, but the impressions are limited enough to keep him grounded. He’s rutting against Chibs’ body, moving the hand away to feel the shape of the other man’s cock again, just pressing himself impossibly closer in any way he can. Chibs isn’t just letting him, he’s thrusting back, as he did by the lake, like they’re actually fucking and it sends all the right signals to Juice’s broken mind.

It feels like ages until they finally get to the belts, zippers and buttons, until wifebeaters are off and there’s more skin, more warmth and Juice is all but purring and brushing up like a cat, claiming closeness as Chibs finds his hand, swirling them together and around their cocks.

“Fuck…”

He’s hissing, almost a sputter and he buries his mouth in Chibs’ neck, choking the sounds that threatens to leave him because holy fucking shit, this feels good. And safe. He’s not overpowered, not laying down, not naked and Chibs isn’t using his strenght anymore than he needs to maintain balance. Even with chicks, Juice has never really been one to control, never felt that kind of confidence but mostly just kept his cheeky grin and encouraged them to blow or ride him and that’s been good and all, but Jesus Christ, this… this is something else.

Chibs’ way of only half-closing his eyes, the way he bends his head backwards, is a picture of someone who truly likes this, likes having Juice on top of him doing exactly this, feeling his goddamn cock and not just a hole imagination and shut eyes can turn into a woman of choise. Chibs, for some absolutely fucked up reason Juice neither can nor want to find out right now, is actually
turned on by *him* and the notion is speeding his blood up, bringing him closer and closer as his balls are pulling up tight, the vision goes a bit blurry and Juice is all but whimpering when he comes, the intensity of it slightly dampened by the meds, but still running through his entire body, pleasure momentarily wiping out pain, numbness and softening his stiff joints and muscles.

“Juicy… Juicyboy…”

It’s just a mumble, strained and almost tormented, a sound Juice never imagined Chibs could make, and he keeps riding, whimpering from the sensitivity but he wants to feel it, wants to feel Chibs come too and the throbbing member is twitching in his hand, Chibs’ fast stripping and pantings still making his blood fucking sing and the Scot comes with his teeth buried in Juice’s shoulder, the groan guttural and unabashed, lustfilled and alive and not once does the man let go of him, but pressing them closer to each other until there’s no way of telling who needs to hold on to keep grounded and present.

All Juice knows as their desperate rutting and moans start turning into softer pantings and exhausted relaxation, is that he could hear Chibs say his name, that they’re both actually *here*, body and mind, not drifting away where they can’t reach one another.
Chapter 46

Chapter Summary

Been a little occupied with the world outside fanfics these last days, but here's finally an update.

What’s happening to him? Chibs can recall moments with women in his arms like this. With Fiona, with Althea, with the few ones he’s been more serious with over the years. He’s not a romantic person, but the afterglow of a fuck, either a wild, pent up one rushing fast to the climax, or a drawn out, smooth ride, discovering every inch of the woman in his bed, has been something he’s enjoyed. The space to breathe in, the feeling of a woman’s curves and and skin, her hair and the sensitive spot in the neck. Sated, dreamy or cheeky smiles, reminding first a young, later an aging Chibs, that facial scars, a beer gut and hairlines creeping back not necessarily are a turn-offs.

Those moments, when they’re both spent, satisfied and Chibs can tell by the look of a woman’s eyes, by her way of leaning onto him, petting his hair or just falling asleep on top of him without letting him move, that he may not be young or fit anymore, but certainly hasn’t lost his stamina or sex appeal, are nice. A short moment of just resting before either the stickiness, smell or lack of any deeper connection will make one or both of them feel the need to move, if just a couple of inches. He can still feel Juice’s now soft cock against his own, the quick wiping off earlier making it unnecessary to move for that reason.

But the man in his arms doesn’t remind of a woman at all, except maybe the way he’s touching Chibs’ hair. Chibs is stroking over the naked back, the firm arse, smooth globes that certainly could use a bit more filling, but Chibs still finds it weirdly hard to resist touching. Thinking of it, it’s probably a lot less weird than getting a slamming orgasm from rubbing dicks. Chibs suddenly realises that Juice actually had a fucking panic attack, although a silent one, earlier and he curses himself for forgetting about that.

“Juicyboy…?”
“Uh-huh?”
“How are ye feelin’, baby?”
“Good. Trying to… decide to get up and wash off, but…”
“But?”
“I’m whacked, man, and you’re a comfortable pillow.”
“That’s yer way o’ callin’ me a fat basterd again?”

The man sighs.

“Really, Chibbie? You think I’d gotten myself between your legs if your beer gut had been a deal breaker? Jesus…”

There’s an edge to the voice and Chibs knows he needs to tread lightly in order to keep Juice here and now, without the anxiety creeping back. In other words, no jokes or snears right now. Chibs keeps moving his palms over the ass, squeezing carefully to see if it’s welcomed. A small hum against his collar bone tells him it’s fine, but he stays on safe distance from the cleft, smoothing his
hands over the hips and lower back instead.

It’s filled with knots that won’t go away from a couple of massage sessions or some long hot baths, but Juice seems to like the firm, slow touch. Chibs may be very weirdly in love, but he isn’t naïve. He can’t stay up here forever, neither can Juice. It’s a respite, sure, and a very much needed one, but if Chibs feels turned inside out from this, what is Juice feeling? Probably completely lost, floating sort of and not in a nice way. Too many people, places and changes coming far too fast for a man with Juice’s illness.

The kitten is laying on the cover and Chibs lifts her carefully to place her on Juice’s back. He can feel the smile against his neck when the animal starts kneading around and lick with her course tongue.

“That’s your idea of getting washed off?”

Chibs smiles too, pressing another small kiss on Juice’s temple.

“She would’ve come up anyway.”

“Probably.”

The voice is very calm, bright even and Chibs decides to make a try. He keeps stroking Juice’s hair, scratching his neck.

“Ye wannae talk about it, lovey?”

“Not really.”

A sigh. Fingers entangling in his hair.

“But I guess… Guess I have to.”

“Ye don’t have to do anythin’, Juice. No one can force ye, I don’t wannae force ye.”

“I know.”

“T’is… a bit scary, ye now. Seein’ ye just disappear like tha’. Wannae help ye, kiddo.”

“You are. You’re here…”

That’s not enough. Not in any fucking way and they both know that, but it’s not the right moment to bring that up. Not killing Juice isn’t the same thing as forgiving him. Getting new information on the matter doesn’t mean every old sin is erased and a rat that suddenly became silent the moment he turned himself in on Jax’s orders, can’t take back whatever secrets he told the cops. There’s been no blowback, not in the slightest, but even if forgiving Juice would be acceptable, that still doesn’t make it a good idea for the Samcro pres to protect him on this level.

If the Brotherhood wants Juice dead, it must be something more than just Tully keeping him as his punk behind. They’re probably not suspecting him of having any part in Tully’s death. If that had been the case, Juice would’ve been killed immediately, but if rumors are true, Juice has been more or less left alone since Tully died. Only one con tried to claim him as his bitch and ended up in a wheelchair from it, giving Juice the reputation of a mad dog, useless for everyone and someone one did best not to come too close. A walking dead, more or less.

Chibs suspects some cons even might have been a bit impressed by Juice’s absolute silence and how he became impossible to use for both cons and cops. He stayed completely out of any incarcerated Sons’ way, never trying to bribe, talk or fight his way back to the club. How the hell did he manage to walk out alive with the Aryans and the MC both wanting him dead? Was it just easier to wait until
he was out? That’s something Chibs knows he would’ve been patient enough to do, but most men aren’t patient and definitely not on his level. Did the guard, Henderson, do something to keep Juice away from the others?

Knowing what he did, that he more or less let the chinks rape Juice before he did it himself, is bad enough but what if that wasn’t the only time? Chibs swallows, knowing his pulse is about to speed up and he needs to keep calm now. The easiest way to keep a con someone inside wants dead, is protected custody. Still not perfect, but it’s the best chance. Protected custody also means isolation, really. Not as a punishment and far more comfortable than the hole, but it’s still a form of isolation. Juice would’ve met the guards, probably the prison doc or a shrink, but otherwise only cops and apart from that only seeing the other cons on the yard while being held in the separate area.

That’s a lot of isolation for anyone and for someone like Juice, who didn’t receive a single letter, phone call or visit for three years, it must’ve been pure fucking torture. And realising he didn’t deserve it, is making Chibs’ blood run cold with anger and disgust. Paying for your sins is one thing, but getting tortured for nothing is monstrous. Juice needs help, proper fucking help and if Chibs can’t contribute to that, he has no place in the man’s life. They can’t hide up here forever. And sooner or later, if there’s gonna be any fucking chance at all for anything else than departure, they need to talk.
In a sick, twisted way it’s almost a kind of honor in it. Being seen as a threat dangerous enough to risk sending people after. Juice is, in theory, well protected. Three years of silence gave him a reputation of sick fucker rather than rat. It cost him, but a dead man has no need for anything, especially not pride or safety. Juice first spent his time in protected custody and once the ATF realised no threats or promises made him talk, they grew tired of waiting and placed him in gen pop.

That should’ve been the end, since the stab wasn’t. Juice didn’t even watch his back, didn’t react when he was placed with Tully. The nazi had had a strange look in his otherwise so impassive eyes and Juice didn’t feel anything. No fear, no sadness, no anger. Nothing. He didn’t expect to last a week, was almost impatient for it. He’d already walked willingly to it once and had no bad memories from it, only the crushing disappointment in the hospital ward, now turned into something numb and lifeless.

This morning, Juice is laying awake in Chibs’ arms, listening to the man’s snoring and getting himself lost in memories. Sometimes, Tully called him kitten and as with so many other things the nazi said and did, Juice isn’t sure how much real malice the words and touches carried. You have nine lives, baby. Never had a cat, miss my dogs but… You gotta be grateful for the small favors, kitten.

Small favors, indeed. Thinking of Tully is painful in a different way than thinking of Jax, for obvious reasons. What’s difficult to understand, is why it’s also easier. Rapes are rapes, no matter how much lube used and the way Tully would look at him like he was a pet or piece of candy, was sickening. The fact that hidden in the big mess of pain and humiliation, there was also a very bizarre form of kindness, didn’t make it easier in the slightest. In the moment, yes, but it's been fucking with Juice’s mind ever since.

Zoning out when Tully fucked him almost became easy after a while. If Juice was good, he would get benzos, moonshine or on some occasions even coke, before Tully lubed him up. The rational part of Juice mind also became good at rationalizing the rapes. Tully was put away for a long time, wasn’t married and had no chance getting a chick inside. Or a dude, for that matter. Men like him didn’t sit down and wait for the best when they could have the second or third best option. A fit, silent, meek and otherwise unprotected con was a step up from jerking off or take whatever crying prison rookies doing their first stint. It also decreased the risk of getting an STD.

Tully didn’t always rape him. Moving into his cell meant being dragged into his routine, following him around like a bitch and counting the days for when he would grow tired of his pet. The first time Juice woke up from a nightmare, crying like a child, Tully had left his own bunk to sleep with him. It helped and that only made Juice self-contempt worse. For every day and night passing out of reach from getting killed since no one was stupid enough to try anything with the Brotherhood’s shot caller’s punk, another layer of hardness would shape around Juice’s body and mind, his heart and thoughts.

Textbook PTSD and an apathy so strong it was a miracle he would even raise from his bunk, but it was as if the connection between mind and body was lost. Juice remembers following the routine automatically, falling in line without really being there. Nothing would get to him, he wouldn’t even run when a couple of cons ended up in a knife fight literally inches away from him at the yard. While the others reacted instinctively and moved, Juice just turned around as slowly as if he was just hearing the signal for getting back inside. He’d ended up in the shrink’s office afterwards, being
asked questions about suicide thoughts and if he needed to get back into protected custody again. That might have been the only time after the failed stabbing, that Juice had actually smiled, even laughed in prison.

Protected custody was lonely and only meant protection from himself, really. Well, from Tully too, but better the rapist you know, right? Henderson was much less gentle, liked to hurt Juice physically and never ever gave even the slightest kindness. When the shrink, who really should’ve chosen another profession, deemed Juice fit to return to the block, the now almost non-existing part of Juice that still felt alive, was so relieved it could almost be confused with happiness. He’d been brought back to Tully’s cell short before lights out and the nazi’s hazel eyes were a weird mixture of concern, relief, anger and smugness.

Juice remembers vividly how he’d not even bothered to turn his back onto Tully, when the nazi came down from his bunk. There was nothing more to hide and protect and all Juice wanted was to sleep, if not forever so at least for the night. He’d let Tully form and bend him to his liking, not to be fucked again, but to have something to cry into. And cried he had, for long hours in the darkness until Tully’s wife beater was soaked and enough of the tension had been released for Juice to drift off to sleep. It was one of few nights without nightmares or just interrupted sleep.

Waking up in Tully’s arms, realising the rapist’s presence improved his sleep so clear it was impossible to pretend it didn’t, was the last straw. Sort of. When you’ve gone from a respected member of an MC club, surrounded with friends you even call brothers, having your freedom and your bike, to take comfort in the arms of your rapist, you’re not worthy of being called a rat or punk anymore. You’re an animal begging to be lead to slaughter, still begging when the butcher doesn’t find your meat worth the effort because not even the dogs will eat it.

Why would Tully put Juice’s name on his will? He must’ve known it would ruin his reputation in the AB and if it was anything the man had, it was pride and care of his legacy. If it was only a way of mocking Juice, it was a strange way of doing it and Juice still have no idea what he’s actually inherited. Whatever it is, he doesn’t want it and especially not if it makes the AB coming after him. Juice has a vivid enough imagination to picture lots of different, painful and slow ways pissed off nazis could kill a punk who’s solely existence threatens to smear the brand name.

The sun is shining through the thin curtain and Dyna is arching her back, stretching legs and yawning. She’s then starting to walk up on Juice’s legs, the side of him really, kneading and purring. The little creature’s way of saying good morning, of just claiming her spot close to him, of being so certain this human is hers, belongs to the part of Juice that’s slowly, very slowly and often painfully, coming to life again. And maybe she’s the reason, more than Chibs or the shame that’s stopping Juice from trying to finish himself off again, he’s still alive. Because this little kitten is the first living creature who needs Juice just as much as he needs her.
Chapter 48

Chapter Summary

I'm currently going through some good changes in my life, meaning I have a little less time to write at the moment, but it's for entirely good reasons even if that means potentially less frequent updates. *kisses and hugs*

Juice is silent. He’s never been much of a talker, but this morning he’s practically mute. Once or twice, Venus tries to make conversation with him, but it’s futile. Juice eats his scrambled eggs and toast, has his orange juice and sips on his coffee, absently petting the kitten in his lap. Chibs isn’t sure what to make of it, if there’s anything to make of it at all. Things seem to swift so rapidly in the man’s head, it’s almost pointless to try and keep up. No wonder he’s so tired.

Chibs needs to talk to Gaines again. And, no matter how much it disgusts him, set up a meeting with the current AB shot caller. Otis isn’t one of Chibs’ favorite persons in the world, to put it mildly, and if he’s behind this kind of shite storm just because he didn’t like Tully fucking a spic, it’s starting to look like a bad soap opera or high school drama, only with lethal weapons, stupid tattoos and horrifying violence added to it. Killing Juice wont give the AB access to Tully’s money and even white trash nazi scums should have enough brain cells to know that. On the other hand, Chibs has seen a lot of less stupid men doing a lot more stupid shite over the years. The majority of criminals are very rarely Mensa material. This sort of dragged out, almost laughably slow way of harrassing Juice is simply not the AB’s style anymore than the Sons’ or dirty cops.

That leaves the prison guard. Chibs doesn’t know anything about this Henderson guy, other than what Gaines told. That he delivered Juice to the chinks and let them rape him. And if that’s true, what else did he do? He’s still working at the prison and Chibs knows all too well how the lower world works. Just as some cons are thriving behind bars as if the loss of freedom is but a smaller inconvenience, there are guards who take the sense of power the badge, keys and billy give them, one or several steps too far. Those who have more in common with the animals they’re guarding, than the citizens they’re protecting from them.

Unlike Juice, Chibs has never been to juvie, but he’s heard enough stories from others to have a clue. He’s also seen a couple of pictures of Juice in his early teens. Fourteen years old and just released from six months in juvie. Short and scrawny lad with a hard smile and without those stupid head tats. Eyes like a big, sad puppy desperately trying to toughen up and painfully aware of his own weakness. Of how little his life is worth in a pit with bigger, angrier dogs. Another one, where he’s probably around twenty, he’s looking more confident, eyes a little smaller and no smile left. He’s holding his sister on that one, a tiny lass with dirty knees and gaps in the grin from loosing baby teeth. By the way she’s holding onto Juice’s hand, Chibs figured she must’ve adored her older brother back then.

“More coffee, Filip?”

The flowing voice, soft and warm. How come Venus is able to sound like she loves every creature on Earth, with the kind of life she’s had? Chibs gives a mumbled thanks and a smile when his cup is refilled and the delicate lady smiles before giving him a small kiss on his head. Then she does the
same with Juice, which makes him blush.

Yes, Venus is a good woman. One of the best, no matter what she has between her legs. All four around this table have lived shitty lives to some extent, but Venus’ story is so twisted with abuse it should’ve left her in shatters, unable to love anyone or anything, uncapable of care and compassion. How many of the men crossing the club’s path over the years, haven’t been through far, far less than her and become goddamn animals?

Chibs doesn’t have to dig very deep to come up with at least thirty names before finishing the morning cup and fag. Murderers, rapists, terrorists. So many of them with brutal backgrounds, childhoods and families in tatters and the chances of getting it right getting fewer and smaller by every loose babytooth. Then they knock a woman up and repeat at least parts of the story they once promised never to be a part of. Chibs will always be grateful he had the good sense of falling for a woman who was stronger than him. In fact, he misses Fi right now. Not in that way, he’s not felt anything like that for her in many years, but she’d know how to handle this shite without loosing her head or heart on the way.

“I think Alexander will call soon, love.”

Chibs looks up, confused. Venus raises her eyebrows and Chibs realises he didn’t even notice Tig’s absence. He lights a fag.

“Where’s he?”
“Uhm, gathering the brothers, I imagine.”

Juice immediately stiffens and Chibs grabs his hand. It happens almost on cue, a chain of reactions feeling far too normal. Juice’s panting cutting off before it can really start, how he’s squeezing Chibs’ hand and the way Chibs leaves the fag in the ashtray to just pull the man close.

“S’alright, kiddo. Nothin’ to worry about, they’re not comin’ after ye. Or me.”
“Of course they aren’t, petal!”

Venus sounds almost upset, as if the idea of the club coming for Juice is ridiculous, even though he was persona non grata for years. Truth is, Chibs still isn’t sure if all of them given an opportunity to finish him off, would stay true to the nay vote. Ratboy wouldn’t do anything off the table and normally Happy wouldn’t either, but this situation is anything but normal and the wounds Juice caused were deep. Venus is right they aren’t coming for him – right now.

Chibs still doesn’t know the full story himself and Juice would rather die than share the already spoken truths with the club. As with so many of the kid’s choises, it’s not going to be a good one no matter what he chooses. As Chibs has been able to think about the choises he once detested Juice for, seeing them in a different light, it’s becoming increasingly clearer how Juice choices were less about right and wrong and more about trying to choose the lesser evil without support. Trying to off himself maybe wasn’t so much an act of cowardice, but a desperate way of liberating both himself and the club from the threat his weakness had become.

“You’re going back to Stockton?”

That voice. So strained, painfully calm. Chibs strokes the white knuckles with his thumb.

“Aye. Ye’re stayin’ here with Venus.”
“Is that an order?”
“Aye, lad. It is.”

Juice looks like he’s about to argue but then he just shrugs and gives a joyless smile.

“Still talk to the prospects like that, Chibs?”

Memories. Swift flashes of a silent, shy and clumsy kid with the most ridiculous head tats Chibs had ever seen. Insecure eyes and smile and a mind shifting from dumb as a doorknob to brilliance depending on where you put it to work. And Chibs was falling and falling, so slowly he didn’t notice it himself.

He takes Juice’s face between his hands, a gesture he’s done so many times with men, but instead of the brotherly kiss on the forehead, he presses a very soft one on Juice’s lips. The man doesn’t smile afterwards, but his hard look has disappeared, replaced with a gentle surprise and a small blush that makes Chibs’ stupid old heart flutter.

“Just… stay with Venus, alright?”
“On one condition.”
“And what’s tha’?”
“Check in on padre Mark.”
“Already thought about tha’.”
“And don’t scare him.”
“Hadn’t planned on scarin’ him.”
“Yeah, right…”

The glare is such an unusual thing for Juice to do, Chibs almost laughs, because honestly it reminds more of a disgruntled pup than a man who knows at least this part of him too well. And this is not the right time to laugh at that. Or anything.
“You’re tired, baby?”
“Please don’t call me that.”
“Sorry, hon, I do it out of habit. Comes with the job, you know. Damn, I did it again.”
“Hon’s alright. Just… not baby.”

Maybe it’s the tits. They’re as real and big as any of the crow eaters, meaning that despite the still very much intact dick and balls and the manly height and stature, Juice simply sees the man who knows he’s a woman, as just that. A woman. And women means a decreased risk of violence. The fact that this one has a dick, doesn’t seem to matter. She’s no Gemma and certainly no Jax, Tully or prison guard. Tully used to call him baby.

“You alright, Juice?”

It’s hard to get annoyed at her. She treads so carefully, delicate and Juice hates to admit it, but he can sort of understand why Tig fell for her. Well, at least within her personality. How she seems unable to get taken by surprise, as if she knows every little dirty, shameful pit of hell a man can fall into. Seeing the people she come across for what they are, without judging until she has all the facts.

“Just want this to end…”

He’s not really talking to her, or himself. It just slips him, like a sigh suddenly turning to words and between Chibs’ love and Tully’s abuse, the club’s despise and his own treason, the prison and the motel, the hospital, the priest’s guestroom and Piney’s old cabin, all Juice knows right now is how tired he is.

“You do know he loves you, right?”

Apparantly she knows.

“Yeah.”

At least he thinks he does. Love is a stupid fucking word. It never means the same for everyone, never feels the same or is acted out the same. Does it really matter whether Chibs only thinks he loves Juice, or if he really does? When was the last time that word held any real meaning for anyone in a gang such as Sons Of Anarchy? Always these big, fucking words and gestures. Love, loyalty, honesty, brotherhood. Family. Treason. For someone like Jax, nothing would ever be enough. In a way, he personified the club’s patch more than anyone. The Reaper is always starving, always hungry for another harvest.

Dyna starts kneading on his lap and Juice is momentarily distracted from the maze of thoughts.

“Look at me… from biker to a fucking punk on the run with a kitten…”
“You’re still a biker.”
“Oh yeah? Where’s the bike?”
“In impound, I imagine. You’re not destitute, Juice.”
“No, I guess Tully made sure of that. Aint that sweet of him?”

Juice gives a joyless laughter, shaking his head.
“You know what’s really fucked up, Venus? Sometimes I actually miss him.”
“Of course you do.”

It sounds so natural, the way she says it. Venus lights a smoke, leaning back on the chair with her elegant legs crossed.

“There’s no use in beating ourselves up for feelings we can’t control, love. After all, we’re creatures of habit. Tully was, for lack of a better word, an important part of your life.”

Juice just snorts.

“You never knew him, Venus.”
“Not well, but I did meet him more than a couple of times inside.”
“Didn’t think you were his type.”
“Oh, I wasn’t his punk, darling. We just made business while I was doing time. Well, before I hook up with Alexander, of course.”
“He was the Aryan shot caller, he made business with people all the times. So what?

This has turned into a conversation Juice really doesn’t like and there’s no escape from it apart from just running away from it. Literally. His throat is dry and he feels almost dizzy. Venus looks at him, eyes serious.

“And why would an Aryan shot caller make a spic punk his sole heir?”
“You’re asking me how that sick asshole’s twisted fucking mind worked? You think I knew him just because he fucked me?”
“Raped.”
“What?”
“Was it consensual?”
“Why are… I… The fuck do you think? You think I wanted that? You think I liked taking it up the ass from a fucking nazi?!”

He’s getting all riled up now, can’t help it, and his heart is speeding because this is a wound with connections deep into so many of the hellish pits he’s fallen into over the years, the web bounding them all together consisting of a lifelong sense of being nothing. It’s followed him ever since his early childhood and even in those moments when he felt the most part of something, like he really belonged somewhere, that sense of being disposable, just a foot soldier as easily thrown away and replaced as a paper cup on a picnic, has always been present.

He’s always been stupid and weak. No wonder he didn’t even try to defend himself from Tully.

“I think the right word for not consensual is rape, Juice. And before you ask me to keep my well-powdered nose out of your business, remember I used to perform in my own mother’s kiddy porn movies. Rape was her version of motherly love. And you know, when I wanted to shoot her after we found my son with her, when Alexander stopped me, a part of me still… still loved her.”

Venus shakes the ashes from her cigarette, the grief she usually hides so well, suddenly very visible in her warm eyes.

“I never thought, not for real, Juice, that I’d be someone’s old lady. To give and receive love from a man. We can’t change the past, love, and that’s why you’re here. Why Filip is here. You’ve loved each other, in one way or another, for all these years and I can see it in his eyes, baby. How he looks
at you when you’re not watching. When you went missing, when you ran into the woods, he was
crying in my arms. You may never have thought of it, either of you, but sometimes life shows us a
way out when we are stuck and lost.”
“That’s how you ended up with Tig?”
“Well, I was unfair to him, to begin with. I assumed I would never be anything more than an exotic
experience, a freak, to him. I… tried to end it. Our secret relationship, because I knew, I thought I
knew, how it would end up and…”

She takes a deep breath, the emotions raw and naked over her face.

“I thought my knowledge of men, of the club, the life Alexander lived, was enough to make a
decision for us both, but I was wrong. I was so convinced I was… well, impossible to love. That’s
what abuse does to us, Juice. After a while, we’re so worn down, we’re no longer able to think clear.
And whatever little scrap of kindness thrown in our way, we will hold onto like our last sip of water.
Ron Tully was yours. I bet… he had his kind moments. When he almost made it…”
“Please, stop…”
“Bearable.”
“Stop.”

His head hurts, his chest is too tight and his limbs are numb. Venus’ voice now sounding distant, but
still too clear, speaking truths that still hurt her to this very day.

“I still love my mother, Juice, even if I sometimes hate the very small part of me that’s capable of
loving her. Whatever you and Filip feel – or felt – for each other, whatever you felt or still feel for
Ron Tully or Jax Teller, good or bad, it’s not something you choose, no more than I choose to love
the woman who tried to rape me straight.”
Chapter 50

Chapter Summary

This chapter takes place about the same time as the previous one.

“What did ye do, Filip?”
“Except from taking care of club’s business?”
“Oh, tha’s wha’ he is now? Our business?”

Gaines is, if possible, even less impressed than last time and looks like he’s been fucked up on prison booze recently. Chibs is impatient.

“Cut the bullshite, Gaines. Wha’ happened between Juice and Tully?”

The man gives an incredulous laugh.

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph… Ye’re here just to look into the Aryan’s use of a punk? The hell’s goin’ on?”
“Just answer.”

A shrug.

“There’s a rumor tha’ the nazi made Juice his heir. Which is just fucked up, but the lads in here aren’t the brightest… “
“And? How did the hicks take tha’ rumor?”
“Take a wild guess. Right now, if I were ye, I’d not go anywhere outside the club house alone, Filip.”
“And Juice?”
“Ye want details on how they plan to skin’im alive and rape’im before getting’ to the hanging from a high tree, or wha’? Ye know exactly how these scums operate, pres. We’re good in here, for now, but… If ye’re hidin’ the kid anywhere an’ they find out…”
“They wont.”
“Sure of tha’? Rumors say Tully left all he had to Ortiz, an’ the man wasn’t exactly poor. Lemme guess: he hasn’t claimed anythin’ yet?”
“Why would’e want shite from tha’… racist arse?”

He almost said rapist and though Gaines clearly knows about that even if only by second information, the very realistic assumption that even though he didn’t see or hear Juice being raped by the nazi, it was no secret.

“Don’ ask me to figure out why. For all I know, maybe Tully jus’ liked to give Samcro the finger, or he had some kind of internal beef with the sheet hicks.”
“Or he wants to fuck shite up for Juice from his fucking grave.”

Gaines shakes his head.
“Tol’ ye last time, Filip. Tully liked’im. Tha’ freak had a way of getting along with people across the colors, ye know. Appearance is one thing, but…”
“Green is still the one color tha’ matters, I know. Still doesn’t explain why he refused to carry out the green light again, no bloody pun intended.”
“Ye’re gonnae get pissed about tha’ now, Fiip? Really? Wasn’ ‘bout Tully seeing it as done from his part. The fucking freak never wanted Ortiz dead in the first place.”
“Then why the hell did he do it?”
“The kid let’im. Why ye think he missed?”

This is a mess worse than Chibs could’ve imagined. The only man knowing the real reason behind it, dead and buried, unable to give an explanation and, which is even more depressing, unable to face the dragged out, painful death he deserved. The only thing Chibs can do now, is basically just keep watch and inform the club further on. And, which is a task he’s cringing even to think of, trying to make Juice talk.

He rubs a hand over his face, spearing his weary eyes into Gaines.

“Ye’re gonnae double yer efforts to keep track on things in here. I want to know every fuckin’ move from the hicks.”
“Of course.”
“An’ the guard ye told me ‘bout.”
“Henderson? On leave right now. Don’ know when he’s expected back.”
“Well, find out. An’ I need that cockroach’s address.”
“Might take a day or two. I’ll give ye a call, brother. An’ if anything else shows up.”
“Aye. Thanks.”
“Wha’s the kid sayin’ ‘bout it?”
“He doesn’t know I’m here.”

Gaines gives him a curious look.

“Ye’re showin’ a hell of a lot of concern for’im.”
“Jus’ tryin’ to make things right, brother.”
“Always the bloody idealist, Filip.”

Maybe. Chibs wouldn’t really call himself that, but his sense of not making unnecessary shit extends to not hurt people unless you really have good cause to do so, and never to use more violence than necessary. For all Jax’s talk about choosing a different path, the man was just as violent as Clay, perhaps more. Chibs’ order of things was always too slow for Jax and maybe Chibs’ picture of his former pres is just as clouded and confusing as the Brotherhood’s idea of their dead shot caller. But that’s the thing with sociopats, right? No one really knows them, because there’s no real person beneath the surface.

But that’s not why he’s here and Gaines aint stupid. Chibs sighs.

“If this had happened in yer charter…”

Gaines laughs.

“Jesus Christ, Filip… Ye think I don’ understand ye’re close to’im? I know ye’re not here just to make shite right for the club. This is personal to ye.”

There’s no use in lying, long as there’s no details to it. Close can mean anything. Chibs nods and
Gaines, to his credit, doesn’t look doubtful or even disgusted. Instead, he simply presses his lips together, leaning back again.

“T’is not my business, brother, an’ I don’ wannae know, don’ need to know more to just take yer word for it. I respect ye, I trust ye an’ I’ll do wha’ I can to keep ye updated on the issue. Nothin’ leaves this room, pres.”
“Except a rumor I’d like ye to spread around.”
“Aye, an’ wha’s tha’?”
“I want ye to look properly pissed when ye leave this room, tellin’ our other friends in here, tha’ I was here an’ not very happy ‘bout Juice slipping out of our grasp, nowhere to be found.”
“Consider it done. Got two more minutes an’ then the camera’s back on.”

They both glance at the device and Chibs just about to ask Gaines make sure the guard he bribed is safe, but the stern expression on the man’s face makes him silent. Their trust is mutual and questioning it would not only be insulting, but too fucking late.

“Don’ worry. They’re still off.”
“Think ye can double check when I leave?”
“Ye don’ trust me, Filip?”
“I trust ye, just not the arseholes without the Reaper in here.”

Gaines almost smiles. He always manages to look more or less depressingly serious, but at least he knows what’s a stake. They shake hands and the guard coming to escort Chibs out, looks appropriately respectful. Chibs sometimes can’t help but wonder if the prisons would need help recruiting. Trying to outwit even the most stupid sad lot in here, still isn’t easy as long as the shot callers and their seconds are running things smoothly. The men chosen to those positions aren’t some street thugs, they’re controlled, manipulating and intelligent animals with far more patience than the decent society will give them credit for.

Chibs leaves, feeling less sick to his stomach than the last time, but no less hurt or angry. Only more relieved that there was no more information of further transgressions, forgotten or just undiscovered, from Juice. Now he has to get to the priest, then set up a meeting with the Aryan shot caller and keep the club updated. His joints crack when he straddles his Dyna and not for the first time, the thought that maybe, just maybe, he’s getting too old for this shite, crosses his mind.
Chapter 51

Chapter Summary

TW: check the tags. When in doubt if you're in the mood for triggering content, check the tags, since I don't want to reveal any chapter content in advance apart from what's tagged.

The panic attack is so strong this time, it’s emphasis is more on attack than panic. Juice doesn’t know what he’s feeling, just that he’s throwing up bile, since the small content of his stomach was lost in a breath. There are cramps, strangling his intestines and no pills can stop that when you can’t swallow.

“Juice, try and look at me.”

Who’s talking? The voice is familiar, but Juice can’t place it, or the hands. He wipes around towards the sound, hitting something or someone and it’s Tully. No, Jax. Chibs? Juice doesn’t know and he’s weak, he’s trapped by his own body’s refusal to cooperate, apart from curling to a ball, making him smaller, hiding the most sensitive bodyparts, futile as it is.

The small examining table is hurting his hipbones, the violent thrusts grinding them into the metal, scraping the skin. He’s tried to zone out, but failed this time, so he’s crying. Not loud, but he’s face to the side, giving up the tears and snot just like his ass.

*Oh, come on, brownie, don’t cry. We’re having such a good time, sugar, and I’m in no hurry. Be a good girl and I’ll treat you like a princess… Just like Tully did, right? You’re missing him, sweet cheeks? Missing your boyfriend? He was a real cheapskate sometimes. I promise… uh… I’ll keep you… company… from now on…*

Tully. Where is Tully? The pain is shattering Juice’s body, the punishing thrusts trashing his ass again, the chuckles and disgusting hot breath too close to his ear.

*Good… thing… of your club… to… ah… let Tully keep you. Don’t think we need to… ask for a transfer of… custody, right, chica? I’ll make sure to… add a flower from you… uh, fuck you’re still tight… at the funeral… Oh, you’re bleeding now, sweetheart…*

Blood. Always the blood. The warning sign. A couple of more thrusts, a little less rough but Juice doesn’t notice. Everything hurts because that’s how Henderson wants it. That’s what gets him off, as much as tears and beggings. Juice hasn’t begged for anything in a long, long time but tears are harder to control.

Finally, the guard is done for now, tying off the condom before shoving a slightly damp cloth inside Juice’s ass, making him whimper pitifully. No traces. No evidence. Pills popped down his throat and he swallows, swallows greedily because it will make him pass out. It’s only to not make him cry and moan on the way back to the cell, but it also saves him from the pain, fear and utter humiliation, if only for the night. When the morning comes, he will wake up clean and in so much pain even the crooked guards would take him to infirmary. But it’s not the crooked guards having the day shift, it’s the ones who give absolutely no shit what so ever, because otherwise he wouldn’t be here right now.
The only piece of information passed on to him, unintential as it is.

He’s limping, partially carried back, and before entering the ward, he’s thrown like a sack of potatoes across the biggest guard’s shoulder, silenced by the drugs for now. The other inmates can hear the steps, doors and locks, maybe even figure out what’s really happening, but no one will say a word, look up or so much as cough right now. The moments it take from entering the ward, put Juice on his stomach on the bunk, make sure he’s not about to vomit, choke on his own pukes are dead silent. In his hazy mind, Juice sees Tully’s shadow kneel beside him, the smoothe hand brushing his cheek so gently, no scorn, hate or disappointment in his undecipherable eyes.

_Hush, baby. Can’t help you, but it’ll soon be over, I promise._

There’s blood, Tully’s blood from the stab wound that was more efficient than the one he left on Juice and it’s dripping from the nazi’s throat. A glimpse of something almost remorseful in his face. The nazi wipes something from Juice’s cheek.

_Don’t worry, sweetheart. You’re not mine anymore. Not theirs either. Sorry for hurting you, baby…_

The hand disappears, the blood too and Juice screams, a howl echoing through the ward. It bounces between the walls, his vision turns blurry and then, finally, oblivion.
“May this mingling of the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ bring eternal life to us who receive it. Lamb of God…”
“…you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us. Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us. Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, grant us peace.”

He’s kneeling with the others, even speaking in chorus with them. The words, he knows them by heart – or from memory, rather. By heart sounds as if he’s a regular visitor, which he’s never really been once he moved out from his parents. Chibs isn’t sure if the Lord is that interested in a heart that beats for the gospel of the Reaper but in case He’s listening, all Chibs can offer is a wordless and probably useless prayer for another sinner, guilty of his own ton of shite, but not, never, in no fucking way possible, deserving of this.

Chibs doesn’t claim to know God’s will, if He exists at all, but he’s fairly certain there’s no divine justice or plan of any kind in all this. He stopped here to give the priest a heads up, not to attend mass, but interrupting an ongoing service isn’t Chibs’ style and just sneaking out like he’s too uncomfortable in a bloody chapel, is beneath him.

Peace to a man of Mayhem. How ironic. Chibs has no intention of going to communion, but either it’s the guilt, the worry, his old Catholic superstitions or just habit, he follows the short line of people attending a Tuesday noon mass, his cut and boots standing out like weed in a well-groomed bed of ordinary but neat flowers. The Reaper just waiting to swing his scythe and harvest them all. As the short line slowly decreases before him and he’s suddenly standing in front of the stranger who didn’t have to know Chibs to understand what he felt for the badly ill man in the hospital bed, Chibs knows he can’t take communion, he’s a sinner if ever there was one and he puts his right hand across his heart, the silent sign for those unable to receive the sacrament.

The priest still holds out the altar bread.

“Body of Christ.”

Chibs knows if there’s anyone in here less worthy of communion than the others, it’s certainly him and the priest knows that too. But the light blue, serious eyes are mild, so welcoming and Chibs may be a sinner and a criminal and simply a fucking disgrace to decent people, but he takes the small, white thing on his tongue and as he closes his mouth, the priest makes the sign of the cross on his forehead too.

“May the Lord bless you and keep you. Amen.”

When Chibs looks up, the man mouths a mute ‘stay’ and he nods. He makes it back to the bench, sitting down staring at the almost insignificant alter with the plain crucifix hanging above. Maybe it’s lent, or something. The few attendants are older women, a couple of them with the small lace headscarf thing Chibs’ own mother used to were to church. Moira Telford was a good woman, strong and hard working and deserved better than the husband and son she got. Good things come to those who have faith, she used to say, but young Filip never believed in that desperate comfort. It was never clear exactly what those good things were – certainly not cooking, cleaning and taking undeserved beatings from Ailean Telford. Not loosing her only son first to the street, than the IRA and finally the Sons, either.
He barely hears the finishing prayer and blessing. The neat little ladies are gawking at him, no wonder, and Chibs doesn’t give a shite. He’s the weed here, after all. The chapel is soon empty and a little while later, he can hear the priest locking the door, walking up to him. He’s removed the altar clothes and waits for Chibs to give room on the bench.

“What’s happened?”

The voice is very low, the kind of voice that doesn’t want to disturb anything or anyone and Chibs swallows.

“He’s safe.”

“He’s safe.”

“From the club?”

“T’is not us he needs protection from, Father.”

“And is that good or bad news, Mr. Telford?”

“Both. An’ it’s Filip or Chibs. But he’s… in a safe place now, with good company.”

“Thank God.”

The priest’s sigh is deep and Chibs realises, maybe to his surprise, that the man really did worry and – which is even more surprising – seems to believe him.

“I just came from prison. Had a meeting with an old friend.”

Just a nod, a wait for Chibs to continue.

“The… people coming after Juice aint sons, Father.”

“You’re sure of that?”

“Bout as certain as I can be. T’is… not about us, t’is about the Aryans.”

“White power.”

“Aye. Putting it bluntly, their dead shot caller had a thing for Juice inside an’ his little gathering of sheet wrapped hicks didn’t like tha’ one bit.”

“I know, he put Juan on his will.”

“Then ye can guess jus’ how popular tha’ was.”

“What does Juan say about it?”

“Doesn’t really wannae talk. An’ there’s more.”

He’s spilling it out. Not all of it, Chibs still has enough of his reason intact to know what to say and not, but the truths he does say, are digging holes in him, deep enough to get to the core of his heart and mind, no protecting layers in the way of that merciless scythe. The Reaper wants his share and what he gets, is a battered MC pres, crying like a wee child on a church bench next to a priest, handing him a tissue while holding a hand on his shoulder.

“Calm down, Filip. Take a deep breath.”

They’re about the same age, living so utterly different lives, but Chibs allows it. The simple comfort from a stranger who’s more man than priest right now. No high and mighty quotes or judgement.

“You’ve loved him for years.”

The simple statement only makes Chibs cry more. He has so many regrets, most of them livable because regrets are parts of life, but he’ll never forgive himself for not listening in time. Maybe it wouldn’t have save Juice, but at least it had given the lad something to hold onto, a chance to make other choises without fearing rejection all the time.
“I failed‘im, Father. We all did, but I… Jesus Christ…”
“Forgiving yourself is always more difficult. And you didn’t authorize what happened to Juan in jail.”
“I just… I wanted to forget‘im. He was dead to me… At least tha’s wha’ I told myself. Don’ expect ye to sympathize or anythin’, Father, I don’ even know wha’ I m doin’ here…”
“Half the time most people coming here have no idea why either.”

The smile. It’s too… humane.

“Some come out of habit, because it’s part of their routine and they don’t know what to do with their Sunday mornings if they don’t come here. Others come because it’s expected. By their spouses, parents, kids, friends… Some come for comfort, others just have no other social life. Only a handful are here out of pure belief and believe me, they often feel more lost than those who can’t wait for the sermon to end.”

Another tissue, another smile. Bright, intelligent and self-ironic.

“Most people who actually feel they need God’s help, are the ones who are scared off by the well-behaved ones. And the most well-behaved ones, are often those who, if they dare to look closer at themselves, are the most conflicted and therefore they won’t open up for anyone, least of all God. Love is admitting your own need, as much as seeing someone else’s and that’s… really scary shit. You really think that cut make you so different, Filip?”
“If the club finds out…”

The priest just nods, serious now. Chibs shuts his eyes, shaking again.

“Ever since he came back… I don’ know, I’ve just been…”
“Crashing?”

Chibs lets out a laugh, smeared in tears.

“Aye. Seeing‘im again… was waitin’ for‘im outside his room an’ I thought I… wanted him dead. I was so angry, so… fucking hurt by his betrayal.”
“You planned to kill him?”
“I honestly don’ know. Had he not looked so… fucking done, I might had.”

He shakes his head.

“Didn’t realise it until a few weeks after, but all I wanted to do when I saw‘im, was to… beg for forgiveness. An’ tha’ was before I knew ‘bout anythin’ of wha’ I told ye now. He was a traitor, a rat and fucking coward to me an’ I still couldn’t…”
“You couldn’t do what you thought you knew was the right thing to do, so you crashed. I thank the Lord for that.”
“Why?”
“Because I really believe, it saved Juice.”
“I’m no fucking savior, Father. Juice was… is in really bad shape.”
“But he’s still here and so are you. What little I’ve seen of the two of you, together… Whatever bond there is you two have, the feelings you share… it won’t just go away just because it would be more practical if it didn’t exist, Filip. Tell me, are you here because of some sense of duty towards a priest or because he asked you to? Did you visit your friend in prison because it was the right thing to do, or because you need to make things right with the man you love?”
“Why did ye offer me communion?”

He blurts it out, not to change subject, but it’s been hanging over him ever since he received it.

“Because the Lord didn’t say ‘come to me only when you think you’re worthy’. He’d be a very lonely God if He only wanted the perfect, the unscathed and content people to sit by His side. I know your world is more than just a bit more brutal than mine, Filip, and I understand you’re gonna have to make some really difficult decisions which consequences I’m not the right person to give any advices about. I can’t get involved in things I can’t morally stand for, and I can’t watch ongoing crimes or brutality without having a duty, legally and morally, to interfer.”

The priest sighs.

“I have my moral code, you have yours, but that doesn’t mean we can’t work together to help a friend. If I hear or see anything of importance, I’ll contact you. If I suspect any… movements from the Aryans or anything else that might be a threat towards Juan, you or even your club, I’ll let you know. I’ll also, naturally, keep all things said here confident.”

“An’ wha’ do ye wan’ in return?”

“Patience. Honesty. Commitment. Not to me, to Juice. And yourself. Make decisions not out of fear or duty, but from what you actually want. And if you find out you really want him, even more than the cut and what comes with it, you’ve gotta decide if he’s worth it. Until then… please, Filip, just be gentle. God knows you both need it.”
“T-tully?”
“No, lad. T’is me. Chibbie.”

Those dark pepper eyes again. Hair falling over the scars. The cheeks are red, a little damp and Chibs sighs.

“I’m fine. Don’ worry ‘bout me, kid. Venus told me ye had a panic attack. Ye know where ye are?”
“With you…?”
“An’ who am I?”
“Chibs.”

Now he sees it. Feels and smells it, rather. Tobacco, bitter coffee, scotch, cheap soap and engine grease. Scents of comfort and familiarity. Of home, if he had such a place or dared dreaming of it. Tully smelled like prison laundry powder, musty cell and toothpaste. And he never cried. The hand around his head is callous, not soft like Tully’s and Juice takes a deep breath.

“I’m going crazy, right?”
“I’m afraid so.”

Soft, brown eyes, gnarly scars. Lips curving to a smile. Small, but real.

“Ye’re entirely bonkers. But I’ll tell ye a secret, all the best people are.”

And it widens, from a tiny bow to a real one and there’s a small sound coming from the man, something akin to a whimper and Chibs, because it really is him, presses a kiss on his hair. It’s almost reverent, not the usual quick peck and Juice leans into it.

“I’ve heard that before somewhere… I think.”
“Aye, ye should’ve. Unless the schools in Queens don’ teach English literature. T’is just not normal missin’ out of Alice In Wonderland.”
“Wasn’t really an A student, you know. Too busy trying to be a badass and pretend I wasn’t scared of girls talking to me.”
“Why am I not surprised…”
“And the only Alice I heard of, was in that stupid cheesy song... How did it go…?”
“Please, no!”
“I don’t know why she’s leaving, or where she’s gonna go…”
“Jesus Christ…”
“I guess she’s got her reasons but I just don’t wanna know. ‘Cause for twentyfour years I’ve been living next door to Alice…”
“Stop.”
“Alice? Who the fock is Alice?!”
“Mary, Mother of Christ, the hell is this shite, lad?”
“A brilliant piece of the nineties, old man.”
“More like a sacrilege. Reminds me why Bobby banned ye from singing drunk.”
“Hey, I did a pretty decent Summer Nights with Donna on that stupid karaoke contest.”
“Don’ remind me…”

The memory is one Juice thought being buried too deep to be found again. One of their parties, it had
been quite soon after he’d patched in. Bobby was doing his Elvis thing and some of the crow eaters kept going with lots of cheezy shit. It was fun as hell and people had been going in for it after a few drinks. When Opie refused to make Donna company on stage, she’d simply grabbed Juice for the task.

It had been embarrassing, but fun all the same. The guys, old ladies and crow eaters had cheered and joined in the chorus. Of course, the stupid, annoying shit stuck to Juice’s brain – as well as Tig’s – and for at least two weeks he had *Summer Nights* ringing in his ears as well as having it hummed teasingly by Samcro’s scariest member. Chibs snickers.

“Couldn’t take my eyes of ye, lad. Jus’ had to shut my poor ears.”
“C’mon, we weren’t that bad.”
“Ye scared Piney’s dog from her wits.”
“That’s right, just blame me. Donna wasn’t exactly fucking Celine Dion either. You just didn’t want Opie or Piney to kick your asses.”
“True that. Donna was a good woman but singing really wasn’t her thing. Or yours.”
“Fuck you, man, I’m awesome.”

Bravado. He knows he’s trying to, not cover up really, but moving away. From the panic attack, the memories, the absolute weakness that pain leaves him with. With a poorly hidden grimaze, he sits up, slowly. Chibs follows him, scooting down the bedside and Juice sighs.

“You spoke to padre Mark?”
“I did.”
“And?”
“He’s safe, kiddo. Tol’ me to tell ye he’s prayin’ for ye, but I guess ye knew tha’ already.”
“He’s a good man.”
“Aye. He is. Probably gonnae put me on a spike to dry in the desert if somethin’ happens to ye.”

There’s something with Chibs’ voice that doesn’t seem quite right. Even while floating on benzos after a panic attack as bad as this, Juice can hear the underlying tension. He traces the left scar with his finger.

“Juice…”
“What?”
“We… we gotta talk.”
“Aint that just what we’re doing?”

He’s afraid now. Uncertainty scares him, always has. Juice needs external order or otherwise he’ll drown in his internal chaos. Talking about himself, his own feelings and doings, means diving into that chaos and in the past, people who’ve attempted to follow him there, have left. Chibs too. The only one who stayed, was Tully, and he wasn’t welcome in the first place. He invaded. In that sence, he reminds so much of Jax.

Chibs’ eyes are weary and sad. Not worried, really, but whatever he learned in Stockton, it’s changed the way he sees things. Juice can see it as clear as the scars. Then it hits him, like a ton of bricks.

“You went to prison… You saw someone who…”
“Gaines.”

Gaines? Gaines…? *Oh, fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.*
“Juice… I…”
“Don’t go there, Chibs.”

*Let me help you, baby. Gonna wake the whole wing up and your pretty face looking all puffy at breakfast. No, no, I’m not in the mood for lovin’, sweetheart, hush now. Need to get a good night sleep, right? Come now, there we go… Don’t cry, baby, it’s only a dream, they can’t get to you anymore. I got you…*

Saved by your rapist. Allowing him to… comfort you. Can you sink any lower? Yes. He can make you his heir. You can see him as your savior. Miss him. Juice misses Jax too. Everyone in his life who used to alternate between abuse and care, and they are many, Juice misses. It’s his version of family, of belonging and love. Being used, stretched, bended, manhandled, broken and then patched up, forgiven for whatever transgression justifying the punishment. And he would always stay, because the loneliness was worse than beatings and scorn.

*Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried.*

In an unmarked grave. What do you even put on a stone belonging to a literal nobody?

*You went out good, sweetheart.*

The pain in Chibs’ eyes is too much. The man looks crushed, like every truth and principle he held onto have just fallen to pieces. Juice knows that feeling, but to him it came like drops, not a big rainy storm making it fucking clear what had happened. He’s been like the frog put in cold water on the stove, slowly heating up until it’s too late.

*I never meant to hurt the club.*

*But you did.*

*I love you brother.*

*I know.*

He’s holding a crying man but can’t cry himself. Juice knows the kind of tears Chibs is now wetting his lap with. You can’t reason with them, only wait. The stuttered, repeated apologies drenched in sobs are pointless, because Juice doesn’t need persuasion. He forgives. Forgets, no, but forgiveness is a natural force within him. He can’t bear having someone he cares even the slightest about, thinking there’s no forgiveness, no way back.

He’s giving Chibs what the man couldn’t give him when he needed it the most. The forgiveness, the open arms, the healing of the reason, the healing of the heart.

Chibs never meant to hurt him, but he did and Juice still loves him. Never stopped. It doesn’t make it any less painful, doesn’t change the past or promise a future. It just is. For a little while, the Reaper will rest.
“I have Hap at the priest now.”
“Hap?”
“He volunteered.”
“Startin’ to be a bit too many changes… Wha’ made’im change his mind?”
“Oh, you know me. I’m a persuasive guy. So… How many were they?”
“Many of what?”

Tig just gives a look and Chibs shuts his eyes as he puts the phone back in his pocket.

“Five.”
“In one go?”

When Tig sounds disgusted, it’s gone pretty far and Chibs shakes his head. He can’t give away Tully’s name without Juice’s consent and he doesn’t know the names of the three chinks. The guard is another matter but still not his truth to spill. And worst of all, is the timeline. Three years of ongoing rapes.

“After Tully was shanked, the guard… saw his chance. Tully’d already killed the chinks.”

That’s a truth he can say without revealing too much, even if Tig probably understands more than what’s spoken. Not too long ago, the VP would’ve made a crude joke, not so much out of spite but because it’s his way of dealing with things most brothers don’t even have words for. As long as Chibs has known him, knowing when Tig is truly joking, still isn’t easy. He wears his weakness like an armour and some of the things he says and does just have no equivalent in the club. That comes to his gentle sides as well. No one Chibs can think of, has been so openly in awe with an old lady as Tig is with Venus. He adores her every step and the respect they have for each other is absolute. Chibs is fairly certain that Southern belle knows every little nasty secret Tig has carried around in his life, not erased them but simply looked beneath them, one by one, and always been able to find something to love underneath.

“Jesus…”

The VP looks like he wants to vomit and Chibs is surprised, but then he remembers the day Venus came to the club, asking for help to find and bring back her son from her mother. The courage she showed by telling them about her childhood. She laid her pain bare and open for them, people who at best could be called her acquaintances, in order to save her son. Tig had held her hand, wouldn’t leave her side. He didn’t interrupt, look away or questioned her. He’d already fallen, she was already his in a way he couldn’t even understand himself.

The harsh jokes are still very much a part of Tig, but the deep concern, he gentleness for broken little things, is shining through in a whole other way since Venus came into his life, especially since Chibs decided she was to be treated as any other old lady.

Five animals shaped as men have raped his pres’ baby and that pushes every other question Tig has about Juice’s person and what was and wasn’t lies in the past, aside. He’s practical in that way. Punishing rapists is never wrong, even for a rat like Juice. At least if a friend of Tig’s is asking. Chibs sighs.
“I know I’ve been distracted, brother. Just like Jax…”
“No.”

Tig shakes his head.

“Don’t compare yourself to him, Chibs. Ever. You do this because you care. Jax never gave a shit about anyone but himself.”

That’s true. It’s taken a long time for Chibs to realise that, but the veil is finally lifted now. The golden boy was nothing but shit covered in something shiny. Scraping on the surface made the appeared solity crumble and the shiny layers go off. The Reaper wants hearts and souls and Chibs is no longer sure Jax had any of it.

“You think the priest can handle it? I mean…”

Chibs gives a short, hard laughter. There’s still a small lump in his throat.

“The question is if _Hap_ can handle the priest.”
“Venus liked him.”
“Aye, but Hap isn’t Venus.”
“He really isn’t.”

Chibs glances towards the small bedroom. The kitten only leaves it to visit the litter box Venus insisted on bringing, and then quickly slinks back to Juice. Every now and then, there’s been a sound of hysterical activity, when she’s running around like a little demon on speed to get rid of energy, but otherwise she seems unwilling to anything but keeping to her daddy’s side. She’s guarding him, almost like a dog would, but accepts Mina’s presence as long as she stays on safe distance from Juice. Venus can come closer and of course Chibs, but she still hisses at Tig. It’s all so… bizarre.

“What if I can’t…”

*_Help him. Save him. Save the club. Save myself._

“Ask Venus.”
“What do ye mean?”

Tig looks at him like Chibs is a complete idiot.

“Really, Chibs? Why do you think _I’m_ still around?”
Chapter 55

Chapter Summary

One of two small chapters from two other pov's than Juice and Chibs. First one out: Happy.

The irony of his name, is that it’s not a nick name. Happy is sitting on the roof of an old drug store, one of the decreasing landmarks of a time when things were “better”. Good old days, as Gemma used to say. Ruth Lowman, rest her soul, hated that expression. The older she turned, the happier she got, claiming things were getting better. Never knowing what her precious baby boy really did for a living, probably was a big part of that happiness. Happy still isn’t sure if his mother knew but didn’t ask in order to make it easier to pretend her son was the angel she wanted him be, or if she really was that naïve.

What Gemma called the good old days, were Ruth Lowman’s anything but good, but they surely made her old. And she used to call Happy her sunshine, until she took her last breath. She’s buried in Bakersfield, at the Greenlawn cemetery and every week he takes that three hours ride to her grave stone, as he once did to her little house and later her room at the retirement home. People often talks about them nursery places as if they were pits of hell, but Happy’s mother actually liked it. A nice room with a view over trees and bushes, good staff and, on those few occasions she actually wanted company, she got it. Happy has that in common with her.

Looking out for the priest feels… disturbing, at the very least. Not that Happy thinks the guy deserves to be gutted by some Ayran shitholes, but babysitting papists who’re protecting a rat isn’t really what Happy signed up for. Sometimes he wonders if he’s the only one in the charter who actually misses parts of the mayhem in Jax’s days. Legal stuff only take you so far and Happy likes killing. The girls at Jelly Bean are a decent substitute, up to lots of shit Happy couldn’t get at Venus’ club and the guys should only know how far from cheap he is with them. As far as Happy concerns, they’re worth every nickle and dime and he always makes sure they’re tended to when he’s done. The girls who’re up to his stuff, are well paid as well as cared for. Being mindful of excessive spending extends to people as well. You don’t wear and tear them out. You also don’t hand over a rat to be some nazi shot callers fuck toy without taking it to the table first.

Happy trusts Chibs. The man has never ever went behind the club’s back, he’s always put the patch first and never whined when shit didn’t go his way. Happy respects that, as he respected Jax coming clean and meeting Mr. Mayhem without bitching and moaning about it. That Juice deserved his death has always been so clear to Happy, nothing to question what so ever considering the things he did to the club, but Happy also knows that when his pres is in serious doubts about a previous decision, he usually has real cause for it. It doesn’t mean Happy will like it or even agree, but it calls for a pause.

Painting Juice’s motel room was a heat of the moment. Seeing that little rat on that fucking delivery moped and knowing there was no Mayhem vote coming down on him, just sent Happy’s mind reeling. He’d not counted on finding a kitten there either. Probably scared the creature half from it’s wits and while Happy feels little to nothing for most humans, getting loose on the four legged species has always felt like a step too low. Killing animals for fun, what’s the sport in that? From Happy’s
point of view, hunters are lower down than he. At least there’s a very good chance the lives on two legs, has done something to deserve it.

Happy can’t say he regrets that. What’s far more disturbing, is that someone else apparently decided to do some more work on that place. If it wasn’t for Chibs being all upset about it, Happy wouldn’t give a shit, really. At the time, Juice was nothing and no one to the club and there were no reasons to think better of him. Happy still isn’t convinced there is and even if it would be, it doesn’t erase snitching and stealing. He’s standing watch for the priest, not because he cares about Juice or feels any regret for thrashing that nazi cum rag’s room. It’s about principles. If Samcro can’t deal out punishment for crimes committed against their club by one of their former brother, neither can some nazi hillbillies.

Juice’s ass is Samcro’s an no one elses, but unlike him and Clay and – which still hurts Happy to admit – Jax, neither Chibs nor Happy are the kind of men who just ignores the table’s votes when it suits them. Patience is a virtue, after all, and there’s still room on Happy’s torso for another smiling face if it comes to that. Until then, he will stand watch for that little priest and his housekeeper. Just because Juice deserves a bullet in the head and an unmarked grave, it doesn’t mean giving the AB free passage and these three years of more or less peacefulness in Charming is starting to make Happy a little restless. He’d like another smiley face.
Chapter 56

Chapter Summary

Second of two small chapters from two other pov's than Juice and Chibs. This time: Venus.

The problem with men, is that so many of them constantly worry about whether they actually are men or not. Venus folds out the blue fan, whisking it over her face. It’s a hot day and she’s gotten used to the air being a little more fresh up here. The sudden stillness is making her feel heavy and tired.

The man curled up in the bed, personifies what Venus dreads about the sex she was born with. Being forced to constantly prove yourself, getting yourself and others hurt just to show you really do have an Y chromosome. Lordy be, men are such strange creatures sometimes. Always ready to make their lives miserable to make a point only leaving them exhausted and self-loathing. Loving someone who deeple hates himself, isn’t easy. When your heart just wants to burst for man – or woman, for that matter – who’s not only completely aware of his faults, but can’t escape them either, love just isn’t enough.

“You’re alright, darlin’?”
“Yeah.”

Venus’ heart is the kind that will expand until it’s ready to burst, when faced with so much pain. She can’t stand seeing another human being suffer alone, it’s just who she is and it triggers her motherly instincts. Since being accepted as Alexander’s old lady, Venus has faced so much more troubled little souls than she could ever have dreamed of coming to her with their wounds and worries. She’s Samcro’s new Gemma in a way, but at the same time so far from her.

The fierceness of the dead queen of Samcro, has always spoken to Venus. A mother fighting for her child, grown up or not, claws and teeth ready to tear every threat to pieces, is the very opposite of Venus’ own mother, but for all Gemma’s good qualities, there’s been so much darkness too. Venus has no difficulties seeing how she would appear to be a safe haven for Juice. Little by little, because she is a patient girl, has she gotten to know the ghosts of Samcro’s past, from Alexander and Filip as well as the other members, their wives and girlfriends. Although, these are new times and the term girlfriends – or crow eaters – really isn’t used like that anymore. Girlfriends are, as in the normal world, the term before fiancee or wife.

Another new thing is that Venus’ prosperous Aphrodite club, is visited not only by men but women as well – sometimes even couples. People always say it takes time to change patterns of a lifetime, but Venus knows that with the right people taking control, those changes can come both faster and smoother. Not all changes are meant to hurt. You can break through defences without leaving holes, wounds and scars.

“You really knew him?”
“Whom, love?”
“Tully.”
Ah. It’s expected. Maybe not this soon, but maybe Juice is stronger than he appears. Venus lits a cigarette, handing the package and lighter over when she sees the man reach his hand out. He’s not looking at her, just lights the stick and drops the lighter on the bed.

“Can’t say I did. Aryan shot callers aren’t exactly known for expanding their relations with people of the wrong color or body.”

“Like half-breeds and trannies.”

“Accurately so. But he was, for lack of a better word, courteous with me. Sometimes one could almost mistake him for a gentleman. Well, for a split second or two.”

Ron Tully just looked like a short little nerd with ugly tattoos and poorly dyed hair. Probably used to being underestimated and therefore so much more dangerous. Venus knows that kind of men very well, and certainly about being underestimated. The hidden teeth and claws kill too, no matter if they’re hidden under a layer of tattoos or powder.

Juice ashes in the tray, staring out in the air.

“He used to… read me poems. Emily Brontë.”

“Interesting choice. Not exactly Third Reich material.”

“Guess not. I… He had his head in my lap, at first. Later, he would have me there. Like… on a pillow. Was so… I don’t even know how to describe it.”

“Like you wanted to die on spot and still couldn’t make yourself move?”

The man smiles.

“Something like that. Never been good with words.”

A sigh.

“Mostly I hate him. I mean… It’s complicated. I know it shouldn’t be, but it is.”

“If it was only an easier thing to hate and love only those who deserve it.”

“You think he… loves me? Chibs.”

The hopelessness, the exhaustion. The man on the bed sounds so old, like he’s seen enough for a lifetime and in a way he probably has. Worn out hearts are the heaviest burdens to bear, because you can’t just stop caring or loving by an act of will, can’t stop stretching your soul until it’s thin like a spread of butter because that’s how love works. When the feelings are shared, you will stop stretch and get some rest, fill each other to the brim and more until you’re both flowing with something stronger. But unrequited love… if time can’t heal it, it will eat you alive, layer by layer, piece by piece until you’re too scraped bare to feel anything.

That’s what Venus secretly thinks happened to Chibs, starting long before Juice walked to his death with calm and determination. She’s seen the jovial Scot engage with women, showing that appetite for life and recklessness that’s in all of the Sons to some extent, but even at the best of times, there’s been that glimpse of a void, so well-hidden behind all that leather and thick accent it takes very skilled eyes to see.

Venus recalls moments when Chibs has turned his back on a woman who’s majestic tits he just five minutes earlier eagerly buried his face between, suddenly looking all lost, tired and confused, mumbling an excuse to the girl and then going outside, seeking out a hidden spot to rest from something. Or when he’s walked past the wall of fallen brothers, only to scate his eyes over them as
if looking for someone who should’ve been there, but isn’t. Someone with stupid head tats, worried eyes and a shit eating grin, perhaps.

“If he doesn’t, that man sure has a very strange way of keeping his distance, sweetheart.”

She strokes the hair where the ink used to be seen. Love is such a strange thing, but not being able to stop loving someone even if you want to, really isn’t strange at all.
Chapter 57

It’s getting dark again. The sky like a black blanket over the forest and Juice isn’t really sure when the evening turned to night, only that he’s completely exhausted and curled on the bed, spooned by the Scot.

“You’re staying with me tonight?”

Fear. Shame. They work with each other, collaborating with such an ease Juice often can’t tell the difference between them. Fearing rejection, too ashamed for the need to give voice to it. Please, don’t leave me, my head gets so loud without you and I need someone to guard it. To kick out the uninvited thoughts, because I’m exhausted and I really, really need to rest.

“Of course I’m stayin’, ye muppet.”

Muppet. Juicy. Kid. Kiddo. Lad. Laddie. Juicyboy. Those are safe nicknames, so very Chibs. Neutral in a way, but he always seemed to have far more of them for Juice than Jax or Opie or anyone else. Lovey. Li’l darlin’. Gaelic words he can’t recall now. One of them meant something like my heart. Is that what he is to the man? His heart? A stupid and broken one, who’s forgotten why it’s still beating.

“Can’t… talk anymore now. Please?”

He’s always had difficulties with talking to some extent. There’s never any balance. Either he talks too little or too much, at the wrong time or to the wrong people about really wrong stuff. There’s no middle ground and never has been. It started with Brian Parks. Juice’s stepdad didn’t like kids who interrupted and Emilia Ortiz didn’t like her kids to go bed hungry. Silence was a small price to pay for a full stomach, a warm house and a chance for a better future. Unfortunately, that silence made shit very loud in Juan Carlos’ head.

He guesses he’s typical in a way. A street rat kid getting an outlet for pent-up emotions by taking risks, trying to be one of the big bad boys. Smoking, drinking, getting high. Fighting, stealing. Forgetting about shit at home, at school. Finding a place where being a looser is the entrance ticket instead of a closed door. Where your mistakes and struggles aren’t immediately met with someone trying to break you in every possible way. Brian Parks. Teachers. Older kids. Cops, judges and juvie guards. All saying the same thing, only using different words: You’re a complete fuck up, Ortiz. You’re not listening, not focusing, not trying hard enough. In fact, you should stop trying altogether because really, you’re gonna end up flipping burgers anyway. At best.

You don’t really expect that a violent MC gang will be the go-to place for friendly smiles, encouraging words, a sense of value and all the hugs and kisses you missed out on at home. It was almost a little intimidating at first, the most of the Samcro members seemed to constantly touch each other. How their wives and kids would be around the club in a way that would’ve been impossible with the street gangs Juice had tried to hang onto but never really felt like he was part of.

The MC was different. It took a while but JC, who had become Juice or Juicy with a prospect patch and a customized bike and was being surrounded with more willing chicks than his shyness really could handle, slowly grew used to the way the guys showed affection. The varied ages among the members and prospects probably contributed, just as the presence of wives and kids, the fund raising stuff and family activities did. A whole other way of being an outlaw, a gang member, than merely a
street thug. It was like coming home.

Chibs’ body is aging. Worn down with wrinkles and sagging skin. Doesn’t remind of Tully’s at all, or the guards or the chinks but it doesn’t matter. His scent is the only thing keeping Juice from not slipping into a nightmare the moment sleep comes. Tobacco, musk, carbolic soap, engine grease and leather. Masculine to a point where it’s almost ridiculous, but not on Chibs. These are smells following him from the rough neighborhoods of Glasgow, probably some of the first he even smelled himself, when he was a couple of days old and brought home to the small apartment of Aileen and Moira Telford. Solid like his stubbornness, annoying before you get used to them and when you are, you don’t want them to change. Not ever.

Laying in another man’s arms like this, is starting to feel so weirdly… right. Has he just gotten used to the absence of women in his life, is this some kind of lingering Stockholm syndrome? Fuck does he know. Chibs lets him cry, lets him shudder and stutter. No judgement, no comments. Only the warm presence of his body. Skin contact, really, and Juice is too far gone to even feel ashamed of the way he curls into the embrace. It’s not until his sobs start going dry, tears decreasing for real, as Chibs speaks.

“Wannae sleep in my arms, Juicy?”

There’s nothing he’d want more right now and he nods, not really trusting his voice, not when Chibs talks so softly to him, with words no Son should speak to another man. But men are fickle creatures, and need affection as much as women. They’ve just learned how to pretend not needing it. How to conceal the need for hugs, caresses and kisses, with pats on the back, hard-slamming palms on the shoulders and, if you’re slightly more physical, chaste kisses on cheeks or foreheads. Rough games and then brush and laugh it off, never really intending to hurt one another.

Chibs is different, always has been for as long as Juice has known the man. His embrace is in earnest, his question too and there’s only a very small flash of shame when Juice answers.

“Hold me… Please?”
Chapter 58

Darkness. Most people have been scared of it, at some point. Chibs is no exception. As a wee lad he was scared of the dark corners at home, of the way the neighborhood changed by nightfall. Shadows and sounds sometimes made him leave his bed and crawl down between maw and da. Thing is with Chibs, he was early when it came to separate shadows from real monsters. Maybe getting whooped by Aileen’s belt, smelling cheap scotch on his breath helped. Shadow monsters didn’t have belts and getting protection from them from the man who had a belt, was strange.

Aileen wasn’t a monster, just a child of his time and Chibs may not miss him one bit, but he’s seen real monsters and his old man wasn’t one of them. A complete arsehole, selfish and mean whenever he got too much to drink, sometimes slapping Moira around, other times Chibs. He put food on the table, though, and as the family left Glasgow for Belfast, to what Moira thought would be a better future, Aileen seemed determined to straighten up. Filip, who wouldn’t be Chibs for many years yet, never really liked the new place. The neighborhood was just as rough, the apartment just as depressing, the drinks still disappeared fast down da’s throat and maw and Filip still got bruises and – in Flip’s case – a red backside.

Chibs isn’t considering himself a progressive guy and knows shit about raising kids, but he’s never been one of those people defending any kind of violence towards wee lads and lasses. It seems… weak, he guesses and even if Fiona didn’t agree, she would bend in that one matter and simply use her scary look to get Kerrianne in line when needed. Trying to go badass against a mother who’s a part of Real IRA is futile and Kerrianne learned that very quickly. In that sense, she’s truly Chibs’ lass. He’s so proud of her.

Over the years, Chibs has met so many boys and men, who’ve been afraid of the darkness and it really took a while for him to grasp why. Many incarcerated men shut off, pretend not to see or hear shit, to protect themselves, but Chibs never has. The years in the army, the medical training and the time in varies jails and prisons have taught him just how much the darkness will enlighten what kind of man you and your cellmate are. When lights are out and the sound of snoring and murmuring is starting to spread around the cellblock, that’s when you can hear it: the muffled sounds of men jacking off or fucking. Of punks getting raped but have learned to bury their pain in a pillow. And the nightmares, the choked tears over the day’s sorrows, missed loved once and above all the absolute loneliness you can feel in a crowded prison.

You learn to shut it off, to fall asleep listening to it, to not pay any attention to others pain and nightmares. If you’re lucky, you have a cellmate who will shake you awake while the nightmare rides you, pat your shoulder and remind you you’re not alone. If you’re really lucky, you might even like each other enough to actually feel less lonely. And if you’re a man with some kind of sense for decency and kindness, perhaps you’ll be the one trying to comfort your crying cellmate.

It sickens Chibs to even think about it, but he knows Juice enough to know that in his state of mind, Tully actually might have been a comfort to him when the stabbing didn’t go as planned. What’s almost as sickening, is that part of that endurance, of not just taking matters in his own hands, has to do with Chibs calling him a coward when what he really needed was comfort, to not be judged. How much do you have to fear being on your own, to accept the sentence Jax doled out? To seek comfort in your rapist’s arms? To curl up like a child in the arms of a man who once told you to pull the trigger?

Juice is a solid warmth in the bed. The thin body pressed firmly towards Chibs and that’s exactly
where they’re both supposed to be. Together, close, erasing the distance that’s been tearing them both apart from inside for so long. Chibs doesn’t forget, but he does forgive. Wants to, needs to and Chibs knows that had Juice begged or cried or spilled out any of his real fears at the diner, things would’ve been different. It was a balance act he never wanted to feel again, forcing his heart not to give in for the stupid, desperate idiot he loved so much more than he realised. The void is starting to fill up now, little by little, and it’s only now that Chibs is able to feel just how big that empty space was. The darkness within so much scarier when he’s finally turning some lights on to have a real look.

The man he loves is radiating that fear. Being forced to feel again when you’ve been able to shut down for so long, is not a pleasant experience and the monsters chasing Juice in his dreams, are slippery and two-faced. The trust and brotherhood Chibs was so certain Juice felt too, was never there, never had a chance to grow deep. The abuse started so early on and the kid was so damn good at hiding it, presenting it as an insecure stupidity and jumpiness, instead of the infected wound it really was. The Son’s aren’t a bunch of hood rats with absent fathers, at least not that many of them. Rough upbringings, sure, but absolutely not all of them and the man who wore the golden crown was a spoiled brat, coddled and protected, so very sure of his place. If you’ve never had to fear true, complete rejection and also happen to be a selfish arsehole, manipulating someone like Juice isn’t hard. It’s also, no matter what crimes the kid committed, fucking pitiful.

Chibs buries his mouth in the soft, dark hair, sliding down to kiss the neck and shoulder. Not seeing any ink is still strange. It’s all gone from both arms and the chest and the ones on the scalp are hidden. He rubs the chest, not really thinking of it, when Juice swallows.

“Blacked, burned, cut… Guess it still counts…”
“How did ye do it?”
“I didn’t do shit. Except take the moonshine and weed.”
“Ye asked to…?”
“No.”

A sigh.

“He… he didn’t want me messy. I really didn’t care how it…”

Swallowing, fingers curling, gripping tighter.

“T ook weeks. Still don’t know how he managed it, but I guess it was just another way of showing how he ruled the place. Pimping up his bitch… The guy who did it, he was… rough. Arms and chest… I was on fucking benzos because I couldn’t stop crying. Kept my shit together during the sessions but… the nights. Man, I was a mess…”

The man snorts and Chibs realises he’s about to cry again.

“I… He came down to my bunk, that first night. Thought he’d… go his usual round, but he just… held me. Cried in a nazi’s arms every fucking night until the last ink was gone. Thought he was going to put new ink on me, mark his property… Maybe he planned on it, but then he got shanked and didn’t need a Puerto Rican bitch to vamp up anymore.”
“Ye could’ve killed’im.”

Juice laughs. Not a happy one, it’s hollow and dark.

“Yeah, sure I could’ve. But what do you think would’ve happened to me then? I’d not been
shanked, but shared around the Brotherhood until they grew tired of me. You really don’t think I’d
 gotten away with a quick death, right? I may be a rat and a fucking nazi’s cumrag, but I’m not that
 stupid, no matter what Jax thought. And you made sure offing myself wasn’t an option.”

That one hits where it hurts and Chibs knows he deserves it. There are tears on his chest and Juice is
trying to stop a shudder.

“It… it didn’t start with Tully, Chibs. Or Roosevelt or Potter or any of that shit. I was never really
in.”
“Wha’ do ye mean, Juicy?”
“After that stint when… when I took one for the club and got stabbed… I sorta knew, only had no
words for it.”
“Knew what?”
“That I was and always would be disposable to them. Clay, Jax, Gemma… I’m not a complete idiot,
no, and I did things that are unforgivable, but I never saw any of you as a means to an end. I was
lonely and stupid and they knew I’d never rat on the club, my only family, unless I was scared out of
my wits or stupid enough to think I did a necessary evil for the good of the club. I… Potter dragged
me inside for weeks, Chibs. He had all those files and pics on us nailed to the wall with fucking links
drawn all over like a big spider web and then…”
“The papers an’ pics of yer old man.”
“Yeah.”

A small whimper and Juice presses himself closer.

“You had your family, Chibs. I mean, even if O’Phelan banished you and took your wife and kid,
they didn’t leave you. I had… no one, Chibbie, and all I could think of was that I’d be kicked out if
you found out about my dad. Not saying it excuses shit, hell I’ll never stop feeling guilt for killing
Miles and blaming the prospect. If I think enough of it, I’m literally getting… momentarily paralyzed
with how much I hate myself for it, but…”
“Hey, hey… C’mere, Juicy, look at me, laddie…”

Chibs is more upset than he wants to show. The wound laying bare like this, all the threads leading
back to this sense of never really belong anywhere or with anyone, are so painful to hear and see.
Juice’s fear, the kind that comes from learning the hard way that you in yourself are nothing and that
abandonment means you’re gonna be left alone in that nothingness.

Juice’s eyes are big and dark, wet and there’s so much regret in them. Regret and self-hatred on a
level not even the entire Samcro could reach with combined efforts. Jax, Clay and Gemma were all
too selfish to feel any of that. A sliver here and there, maybe, but they never carried the guilt around
themselves. They piled it onto others and Juice was the perfect beast of burden. Being a family
means carrying each other’s shit when needed. The Teller-Morrow family secrets were never
supposed to be Juice’s to carry. Nor should his heritage have been.

Chibs cups Juice’s chin, bending it slightly upwards.

“I can’t change the past, Juicy, no more than ye. It is wha’ it is, lovey. But… whatever shite
happened to ye, or me, or the club, here we are. An’ I… I don’ wannah be without ye again. Don’
know if I have what ye need to keep goin’, but…”

Why is this so hard to say? The words seem to get stuck in his throat and he wants to shut his eyes,
but can’t.
“I need ye. I need ye too, Juicyboy. I need ye too…”

The darkness is always more merciful than the light.
The need for deep talking is satisfied, at least for now. It’s still dark in the room, outside too, but the fear of it seems to be gone, along with the exhaustion. They’re both awake, just laying in each other’s presence with Dyna purring at the bedend. It’s been a day reminding more of a week squeezed into sixteen hours and Juice just feels empty. Like he’s been throwing up and metaphorically, he sort of has. There’s just not the same vile taste or smell left.

Chibs’ breath is skating over Juice’s nape, no words, just the sound of breathing. Right now, it’s far louder than Juice’s head. In fact, his tangled thoughts are unusually structured and quiet right now. Resting in more or less straight lines, moving in rhythm with his breaths instead of rushing around like a mob on speed in a narrow street, threatening to trample all things to dust. Not even men of Mayhem can live on chaos alone.

“Don’t leave me.”

He’s said that so many times, with those exact words or in less vulnerable ways. Looks, touches, other words. Mostly a silent desperation, the chaos of loneliness threatening to come crashing down and once it seems at least momentarily safe again, he’s shown his fearless, untroubled grin that fools almost everyone, even himself sometimes. But it’s a Reaper’s empty grin, death ghosting behind straight, white teeth and dimples, a terror bleeding through every ray of sunshine: If you leave, there’s nothing left of me. If no one ever says my name again, how do I know I’m still alive?

“Never.”

The breath of the word, the quiet, Scottish voice tickles his skin in a playful way, contrasting the sincerity but not brushing it off. Chibs has always been good at that, Juice thinks. Handling the heavy stuff without resorting to dark jokes and pats on the back alone. There’s always the openness, not exactly visible unless you’ve known and really been around him for at least a few years, that seriousness that can snap out of drunkenness, jokes or pussy in a sec, if there’s a need for someone with a working mind around. There always is.

Kisses following every little bump of bones in Juice’s spine, from the hairline down between his shoulders. They’re still sticking out a little too much, rebuilding takes time and running, panicking, mourning, hiding, crying and aching are energy thieves on expert level. The time for refueling hasn’t really been spent doing that and PTSD isn’t exactly known for giving what you would call a healthy appetite. The state of his body usually doesn’t irks Juice as much considering how his brain fucks with him, leaving less room for vanity, but it’s so obvious that life hasn’t gone easy on his muscles and fat. Or, what used to be muscles and fat.

“What now, lovey? Why the greetin’?"

“Sorry…”

“Hey, no apologising. Jus’ me, mo chridhe*,”

“It’s fucking stupid, Chibs. Really, nothing to talk about.”

“Lemme be yer co-judge on tha’, Juicyboy. Now, take a deep breath an’ wind down before ye get yerself another panic attack, kid.”

It’s still strange, this utterly caring side of Chibs, that doesn’t wrap up the worry or weakness in thick layers of hardass logic, business handling and rough words of getting your shit together.
“You’re just gonna think I’m an idiot.”
“Already know ye are an’ I still love ye. Now spit it out.”

Juice takes a deep breath, looking away.

“Look like hell.”
“Wha’?”
“Me. I… Have you seen me, Chibbie? I’m… I look like shit.”

There’s a moment of silence, a deep sigh and Juice feels his chest tightening.

“I… I know I sound like a fucking whining bitch, but…”
“Christ almighty, lad, will ye stop yer shite rambling?”

The Scot growls and turns the small bedside lamp on, taking Juice’s chin in a firm grip.

“Look at me, Juice. Look at me.”

Hard, weary eyes and bags underneath them. Glasgow smile, sagging skin, whitening temples. Chibs turns Juice’s head down, careful but determined and with his other hand, he tugs the wifebeater off in one swift move.

“Wha’ do ye see, laddie?”

A beer gut, a bit shrunken but still very much there. More or less well-done ink, scars, nicks and all the things a rough, violent life combined with age will do to you, sooner or later.

“I look like shite, don’ I?”
“Chibbie…”
“No!”

Chibs grabs Juice’s chin again, forcing eye contact.

“Listen to me, Juicyboy. I’d never… not once, questioned wha’ I wanted or not, until ye showed up on Teller-Morrow’s doorstep like a lost puppy. Ye have any idea wha’ tha’s like, huh? Hearin’ there’s a new prospect, really good with the bikes an’ the tech stuff an’ ye expect some kind of cocky little shite who thinks he’s a badass… An’ then ye see this… fucking nerd with stupid head tats, smilin’ at ye like…”

An idiot? A retard?

“Bloody sunshine.”

The weak light is merciful, hiding most of the blush creeping over Chibs’ neck and Juice’s cheeks. The grip is loosening, turning to a softer brush of callous fingers and Juice is not a young, bright smiling prospect anymore, but there’s sunwarmth slowly reaching it’s way back under his skin again. In his smile, his eyes. His little broken heart. In a scarred kiss.
“Chibs?”

He’s a light sleeper, the army and IRA made sure of that, but Chibs also recognizes voices in his sleep. He just looks up from the warm body he’s curled around, too tired to know if he should be embarrassed for his VP seeing him like this.

“Wha’ time is it?”
“Early. Just got a call from Happy.”

Chibs nods and as he carefully tries to untangle himself from Juice, Tig leaves again, giving his pres and the rat who yes, may have been fit for that title once, but not anymore. Juice murmurs in his sleep, grabbing Chibs’ hand and Chibs leans down to kiss his temple.

“Gotta go out to the kitchen for a lil’ while, lovey.”
“Uh-huh.”
“Not leavin’ ye.”
“Mhm…”

No “you promise”? This is new. Juice shivers and Chibs is just about to give that assurance anyway when the man lets go of his hand.

“Gimme your blanket… ‘S cold.”

There are so many things Sons don’t do. That men living this kind of life regardless of patch can’t engage in. Things that even the average Joe won’t risk getting caught doing, feeling or wanting. Chibs has never let his mask slip entirely with anyone, man or woman, child or even a fucking pet, because showing himself too much of the man he’s never really explored would lead to inner battles he doesn’t have time nor the energy to deal with.

He carefully tucks the already burning man in with the other blanket and Juice gives a small, sleepy smile. Chibs finds himself frozen on spot, just looking at the man sinking back to sleep again with the kitten curled to a little roll by the footend. Then he gets up, pulls his dirty clothes back on – he really needs to do some laundry – and leaves the room.

For once, Venus isn’t up and running, it’s just Tig sitting at the table with a cup of coffee and a fag. Chibs takes the second cup and slouches down, searching through his pockets only to realise the fags are in his jacket and Tig just hands his own package over.

“Thanks. Venus’ sleeping?”
“Yeah. Phone woke her up and she offered to make breakfast.”
“She’s too good for ye.”
“I know. Colleen would’ve elbowed me.”

Chibs snickers. That Tig’s first and only marriage crashed and burned long before the actual divorce is no secret.

“So, what did Happy want?”
“T.O. and Ratboy were followed the other day.”
“Followed? By whom?”
“They weren’t sure. They were heading back from Aphrodite and apparently, Henri was there, along
with a couple of his minions.”
“Tha’ fake jewelery scumbag?”
“That would be him, yeah.”
“Businesses are fine, money’s comin’ in an’ there’s not been any shite from the cops, so what’s his
problem?”
“According to T.O. and Rat, apart from being a fucking creep, nothing. Hap thinks he’s bad news.”

Chibs snorts.

“Hap thinks everyone without a patch is bad news. Ye’re gonnae get to the point, or wha’?”
“Club’s own worry wart took a little trip of his own to Aphrodite, Henri was still there and Happy
waited until he was done.”
“An’ I guess he didn’t head home to cook supper afterwards?”
“Not unless he can be in two places at once. Happy caught Henri in a meeting with a couple of
friends he seems to wanna keep a secret. I imagine Otis and Henderson didn’t want an outdoor
picnic in the park with him either.”

A lowlife fence, the Aryan shot caller and a dirty prison guard in a meeting not ending in blood is
bad news. Really fucking bad news and Chibs grits his teeth.

“Shite…”
“And later, while on priest watch, Quinn called Hap. Apparantly the whiteys felt some Catholic
supersitions and needed to pay the priest a visit. Changed their minds though, when they saw
Quinn.”
“How many?”
“Just two sibling inbreds, eyes looking anywhere but straight forward, you know.”
“Means they were probably only there to spy.”
“Yeah, no one’s ever accused Mount Whitey’s little pigs for thinking too much, but Otis doesn’t
have shit for brains. They weren’t there to sell girlscout cookies.”

Chibs just shakes his head.

“But wasting that much time and resources just spying on a priest, when they must know Juice isn’t
there anymore is just…”
“Retarded. That’s the word you’re looking for, pres. I mean I get it, they don’t want a living proof of
their former shot caller’s less pure-bred prison activities walking around and spread the word but…”
“T’is not about that, t’is about the money.”
“Money?”
“Ye know just as well as me an’ the Aryans tha’ Tully’s favourite color was green, not white. Tha’
nazi piece of shite left Juice his money.”

Tig stares at him for a second and then laughs.

“Jesus…”
“I’m so sorry for dragging the club into my personal shite, Tig, and…”
“No, no, no.”

Tig holds up a hand, interrupting him. Very few people can do that to Chibs Telford without getting
their finger broken, but Tig can and Chibs drops silent. The VP finishes his fag, lights another one
and looks down at the ashtray.
“We voted, pres, and that vote stands, so none of that crap. Doesn’t suit you, Chibs.”

He blows out some smoke, throwing a glance at the closed bedroom door.

“Just because Juice did what he did, or that you fell high over heels for him – oh, you did, Chibs, so you can shut that piehole and save your denial for confession boot – it doesn’t mean this attack on him isn’t personal to the club too. We voted, remember, and the vote said we make sure we have all the facts before making any final decisions. We all voted for keeping Juice safe, not because we like him, but because no inbred in a sheet call the shots for Samcro. Not even about a rat. So this isn’t your personal shit, pres, it’s ours, and if word gets out we let the AB overrule us, we’ll look weak regardless of what Juice did or didn’t.”

Another laugh.

“Man, I thought Jax was a two-faced sociopath, but this… I have to admit I wish I’d paid Tully some visits, to have a chat. I mean, Happy makes me feel normal but Tully kinda makes me the average Joe. Of course, I’d have to rape him to death afterwards.”

And Chibs wouldn’t stop him, but Juice probably would. Stockholm Syndrome at it’s finest, combined with a heart that longs so much for forgiveness, it can’t stand not giving it to others. God only knows how much the rest of the brothers understand of the reasons behind their pres’ actions these days and even if they did understand, there’s no guarantee they’d sympathize or forgive.

“Keep in mind, Chibs, that Jax was the one giving Tully free hands, while letting Juice think he had a chance to re-earn the patch.”

“I know.”

Oh, he knows. God, he knows. The sound of a door makes him turn around, seeing Venus padding out in her long, silky robe, hair all messy and Tig smiles like he’s falling in love all over again.

“Didn’t mean to wake you, baby.”

“Oh, you didn’t, I’m an early bird when I’m on the countryside. How’s the boy?”

“Sleeping. Had a long night.”

Chibs looks away, grateful Tig ignores the unintended opening for a lewd joke. There’s a time and place for everything and this isn’t one for that kind of humour. Venus brings out ingredients for french toast and Chibs looks at her.

“Listen, doll, would ye mind keepin’ an eye on Juice today?”

“Isn’t that what I’m supposed to do, Filip? Sure aint here to look for lost lumberjacks missing their mommies.”

“Ye’re a treasure.”

“A very rare one in very cheap dresses, baby. I assume you’re gonna take my tiger with you and that you’re heading somewhere more civilized, as in close to actual streets and houses?”

“Aye, we’re heading back to Charming.”

“Good.”

She leaves the half-done pancake mixture, pulling up a little legal pad and a pen from her large robe pocket.

“I hope you’re not planning on making a mess of some sort at main street, love, because I have a few
things I need you to bring back here, preferably not tainted by smoke and ashes. For a start, more sunscreen.”
“Oh, he’ll be back in no time, hon.”
“Which one of them?”

He’s being rude to her and had Tig been here, Juice has no doubts he’d punch his face, which he’d deserve. Venus is serving him a flapjack and coffee, it’s smells delicious, everything is so neat, so caring, from the little napkin folded by the plate, to the almost arranged dab of whipped cream, topped with blueberries and a small ripple of maple syrup. It’s the kind of breakfast you serve a loved one, or important guests you want to impress. Juice is neither.

The man who knows he’s a woman, gives a small smile over her coffee cup.

“Not everything that’s new since you offered to add unicorns to those glorious pictures of me and the pie man, has changed for the worse, my dove.”
“Maybe not for you.”

Juice swallows a piece of the flapjack he doesn’t deserve. It’s delicious and it bites his guts. He doesn’t deserve this. It’s not some self-centered need to be told he is, because that’s for people who have fucked shit up, but still has a spine. Juice eating this delicious food, is just throwing pearls for pigs. You don’t feed a corpse with homecooked food, even if the corpse is breathing.

“Their barks are generally louder than their bites these days. The fact that I’m still around should prove that, hon.”
“Yeah, but there’s a slight difference between you and me, Venus.”

Juice puts his fork down, looking straight at the lady.

“You didn’t steal from them, rat on them, lie to them, didn’t kill a brother in panic because you were a fucking coward. You… you didn’t cover up the murder of Jax’s old lady… You….”
“Aren’t a Son.”

Venus’ smile is so unthreatening, Juice can understand how good she must’ve been at her job. Why men deadly scared of discovery would fall for her absolute sense of kindness. She’s a confession boot without judgement, without attonement. Just forgiveness whenever it’s hers to give, as long as the heart in need of it, is truly remorseful. To Tig, she must be salvation in high heels, because whatever ashes her ruined life left for her, she’s risen like a Phoenix.

She reaches out for Juice’s left hand, taking it.

“I wasn’t a part of the chaos, sweetheart, but I know a lot about it. I watched parts of it, saw the house of cards the Tellers and Morrows had built and how it came crashing down. I wasn’t in the middle of it, I was watching from beside. The view more often than not, is better at some distance.”
“You know I’m only sitting here because of the meds, right? I’m a basket case, Venus.”
“In the company of some of the finest Californian white trash, hon.”

He has to smile too. She’s contagious, this creature.

“And a Scot.”
“Ah, yes. The grumpy ol’ Scot, thinking he can solve every problem with reason.”
Her sarcasm is so over the top, it elicits an actual laugh from Juice.

“Yeah, that sounds like Chibbie.”
“He used to stare at the wall of fame.”
“The what?”

Venus looks serious now, squeezing his hand.

“The little family album on the wall at the club. All the brothers, dead and alive, and Filip would sometimes just get stuck in front of them, looking.”

Juice shrugs.

“So? We all did.”
“Yeah, but maybe not so much at the empty spots. At a specific one.”
“Jax’s still hanging there?”
“Yes.”

Of course he does. The golden boy, the crown prince, the heir to the seat that never was big enough for him. Only nn MC club is not a kingdom and there’s no birth right triumphant what’s best for the patch. Or shouldn’t be. Jax’s sons will never sit in the high seat. Their father was too busy trying to keep it for himself, to see how he widened his space at the cost of others. Crows are, after all, scavengers. Dead bodies are of use to them, as are dead hearts.

“I never meant to hurt the club.”

He’s repeating himself, but how can he not? Dead men are stuck where they fell and simply dragging him out in the woods won’t make his heart move in any direction, right or wrong. It’s still limbo, just a different one.

“Of course you didn’t. I think that’s very clear to him by now. You’re not the only one feeling like you’ve failed and betrayed, darling, and I don’t know anyone who’s as hard on himself as Filip. Not even my Alexander.”
“You’ve changed him.”
“No really.”

Her smile turns a little secretive.

“We can’t change other people, Juice. What we can do, is allowing ourselves to discover other parts of us through the eyes of others. There is, always was, so much love in that man. He just needed someone who could give him his blessings to show it. Now, I’m not a little girl easily swept off my feet by a pretty veneer and some gentlemanly behavior, darling. My expectations weren’t what you’d call high when I met Alexander, but I can assure you, love, he was nothing but a true gentleman.”

Juice can’t help but smirk.

“Yeah, I saw how he looked at you in that store, totally lost. He was peeking through fucking blinders when you left.”
“He did?”

Venus’s face is now nothing but the one of an over the moon high school girl and Juice snickers.
“Jesus… Fucking lovebirds. Don’t tell me you’re getting married too?”
“Oh, not yet. Takes time to find the perfect dress. A girl wants to feel like the prettiest one on Earth on her wedding day.”
“Yeah, I guess. S’it even legal?”
“So… you’re gonna be Tig’s wife…? Seriously?”

It’s not the timeline, that it’s been legal for almost ten years, that’s baffling. The MC’s rules and society aren’t necessarily changing with the rest of the society. In many ways, it’s a deeply conservative, racist, misogynistic environment where women are reduced to mothers, wives, daughters, girlfriends, crow eaters and hookers in that order. The VP marrying anything else than a hundred percent woman should be so out of order, it’s not even possible to form a thought of.

Venus gets her hands around her neck, unlocking a small silver link with a pendant which she hands over to Juice. It’s flat and round silver, engraved with an angel.

“His has got the symbol of Venus.”
“The love goddess.”
“That’s right. As you can see, mine has the guardian angel.”
“Most people wouldn’t think of that at first, or even second.”
“Or third or fourth.”

She leans back on her chair.

“Not all angels got wings and not all empty spots can be filled with someone else. Not even a nail on the wall.”
“You’re talking like this with Tig?”
“Oh, you’d be surprised, love. We all have our roles to play, sometimes we even enjoy them, but it’s tiring, trying to hold your head high and walk around like you owe the world. We all need a place to crash when we take our heels and cuts off, Juicy. And my guardian angel wears a very sharp knife in leather straps, keeping the wolves off my back.”
“And his wears spike heels and sharp nails.”

Venus gives him one of her brilliant smiles again, then she turns serious.

“Look, hon, Venus knows a thing or two about some of the things you’re going through. And, more important, she knows a lot about men, especially the kind of rough old brutes we both love.”
“I… I don’t love Chibs.”
“Oh, Juice… You really need to improve your lying. More flapjacks?”
Walking into the club house, used to feel like coming home. That feeling has decreased slowly but steadily for a long time now. The pictures of dead brothers – as well as those missing on the wall of fame due to transgressions death can’t forgive – so often seem to make it more of a house of remembrance, than a house for the living. It’s a wall of blood that Chucky will dust and finish every week, like an old woman visiting her late husband’s grave with fresh flowers and scrub off any stains from birds, beasts and weather.

“Morning, pres.”
“Mornin’.”
“You want coffee?”

It’s kind of having a club housemaid, only with a bald head and Mickey Mouse hands matching the bloody apron. One of the girls apparently bought it for him and embroidered his fucking name on it, which is a level of domesticity not even Venus could muster. Thank God. This is an MC club, not a charity hangout for bored housewives. But Chucky’s coffee making has improved and Chibs needs all the energy he can get.

“Aye, that’d be nice, Chuck.”
“Coming right up.”
“Happy’s here yet?”
“He crashed in the dorm last night. Rat too.”

Chucky shrugs with that fearful little grin saying he really doesn’t want to be the one waking the Sergeant at Arms up. Usually, Chibs wouldn’t care but just wave him off, but he really needs that coffee now and feels generous.

“Then wake up Rat an’ tell’im to get Happy up an’ running. Need’im here asap.”
“You… don’t think it would be best if he… you know, had some coffee too, before you…?”

He gestures with the ridiculous prosthetics and Chucky may be a loon, but he probably knows more about all of the members little shiftings in mood and behavior and how the access to or lack of different drinking supplies affects them on different times of the day.

“E’s got a lass in there with’im?”
“Yeah, I think so. Cherry.”
“Who?”
“The copper head.”
“Well, she’s gotta get her red head off his cock now, Chuck. So I suggest ye go get Rat, unless ye’re afraid he’ll bite ye.’

Chucky makes a grimase.

“More afraid of Brooke, actually.”
“Why am I not surprised. Now get goin.”
“Yessir.”

As the looney maid runs off, Chibs takes his coffee to one of the couches and sinks down, throwing his feet on the table. A moment later, Brooke shows up, wearing baggy jeans and an old, striped
shirt.

“Good morning, pres.”
“Hey there, darlin’. Rat’s up an’ goin?’”
“Yep. Thanks for that.”
“Sorry. Club business.”

She rolls her eyes and accepts the cup of coffee and donut Chucky offers her. She pats his cheek.

“Thanks, sweetie.”

Chibs frowns.

“Hey, where’s my donut, Chuck?”
“Venus told me you and Tig needed to cut down on the cholesterol.”
“What?”

Chucky gives his fearful grin.

“Sorry, pres, but she was... very persuasive.”
“When exactly did this place turn into a fucking health centre? Get me a donut or I’ll cut ye something to match yer Mickey Mouse hands.”
“I accept that.”

That ridiculous bow and he’s off again. Chibs rubs a hand over his face, groaning and Brooke snickers.

“Rough night, pres?”
“Aye.”
“The girls miss you. Found yourself a girlfriend?”

There was a time when no crow eater, or even old lady except for Gemma and maybe Tara, would’ve dared to speak to the pres like this. When the girls at the club house would either stay in the background, waiting for the guys at the table to offer them attention, make a pass on a party or just be lowkey flirtatious until the right moment occurred. Treating crow eaters like anything more than pieces of candy on two legs, supposed to keep their mouths shut unless they’re busy swallowing cock, wasn’t an option.

These days, the old ladies aren’t nearly as accepting of what once wasn’t even seen as cheating, and previous fearful respect towards the members, is slowly turning into something more demanding, but also more interesting. It’s not the 70’s anymore and to himself, Chibs admits it’s a kind of freedom in not having to walk in the same circles over and over again, pretending things haven’t changed. Chibs smiles at Brooke.

“If I needed one, I’d have a look around here.”
“The girls miss you, Chibs.”
“That so? Then how about our prospects? Don’t tell me the lasses don’t have their hands full with them.”

Brooke laughs.

“Oh, they’re not complaining, pres. Just longing for a party. Haven’t had a proper drinking spree in a
while now.”
“Aye, t’is been a while…”

Honestly, Chibs has barely given it a thought, but being a pres is more than taking care of business. You have to be social, have to make sure not only your brothers and business partners are happy, but the club associates too.

“What’s happening?”

Happy has shown up, still sleepy and holding a cup of coffee like it’s a weapon. Behind him, a very grumpy Ratboy stands, shirt half-buttoned and with an exasperated look on his face. Brooke gets up, patting Chibs’ shoulder.

“I’m gonna play loving wife and get Rat some soggy toasts before he starts whining.”
“Tha’s what the best wives do, hon.”

Chibs snickers and Ratboy just rolls his eyes.

“What’s the fucking hurry, Chibs? Someone died?”
“Ye should know. Ye woke up Happy.”

Happy, who seems impossibly more murderous than usual, doesn’t even blink, just gives Chibs a long, incredulous look before swallowing half of the coffee in one go. Chibs honestly has dreaded this ever since Juice, in the midst of drugs and pain, mentioned the green smiley on the wall, and he nods in direction to the chapel.

“A word, Hap. Alone.”
Chapter 63

Chapter Summary

Hi there! Been a bit busy the last days, but here's an update :)

“Sure you don’t want conditioner, baby? Right, sorry, not baby.”
“I’m fine, thanks.”
“Someone made a very good job with your skin.”

He’s dripping wet but still half-dressed. The ewer has once again served as a shower and his naked torso is showing off for the trees. Thank God they don’t have eyes. Juice shivers, despite the warm weather. The grey pants hangs loose even with the belt and in the reflection of the window, he can see what once was a ripped body with ink he was entitled to and proud to bear.

The laser treatment Tully forced him through, sure made the result far more aesthetic appealing, the healing a lot better than a sanitized knife, fire or blackening could’ve accomplished. It wasn’t an act of kindness, just a way of showing the Aryan shot caller’s power over not only his punk, but the prison and most of all, the Sons. That once you gave up a member and handed him over to Tully, it was no longer the club’s call what to do or not do with him. That’s how spoils of war work and, as Tully would say when Juice panicked over not getting the tats removed the right way, it wasn’t Juice’s decision to make. Juice turns from the mocking mirror.

“Wasn’t my idea.”
“I figured as much. Must’ve cost him a lot.”
“Tully?”
“That would be his name, yes.”

Juice swallows.

“How do you know he…?”
“Sweetheart, I did my first stint for dealing long before I learned to walk in high heels. You can get almost anything inside, as long as you have money and I’ve seen enough prison ink to know yours must’ve cost a smaller fortune in bribes. And since I’m pretty sure you didn’t have that kind of money and I can’t imagine Tully sharing as much as a dirty sock with anyone, my guess is he wasn’t keen on letting others play or experiment with his favourite toy.”

Had it been anyone but Venus, it would be humiliating being referred to as a nazi’s fuck toy, but there’s no malice of any kind in her voice. Also, it’s true. Ron Tully, in a way, felt like all the fears and struggles within the club, squeezed into one, pale, equally disgusting and comforting body. It’s not break and destroy in order to build up something new. No, the breaking and destroying was already thriving, with the help of Jax and Gemma. Tully was just one more kind of pest and weed invasion in an already infested piece of land, carefully tended to by the Reaper. Juice sow, Jax watered, Chibs unsuccessfully tried to dig up, and Tully harvested.

“He should’ve killed me…”
He’s not gonna cry. Not now. And he knows it wasn’t a deliberate miss. It was too many things out of Tully’s control to interfer. The best prison doc just happening to be close, the short distance to infirmary. You were extremely lucky, the doc said once Juice woke up and that’s when he knew he deserved a living hell, for what kind of God would allow him to survive for any other reason than fulfilling a punishment.

He’d been angry, but also, once the shock of being alive had passed, convinced that whatever time he had left, it shouldn’t be long. That Tully or one of the incarcerated Sons would finish the job as soon as he wasn’t under extra surveillance anymore. The fact that, once he was released from the sick ward, was sent back to protected custody, meant he was gonna live and Juice panicked. Without anyone near to kill him, or even provide the opportunity for him to take matters in his own hands, was an absolute nightmare of guarded loneliness.

Juice has tried to forget a lot about the weeks in protected custody after what was meant to be the last payment for his sins. How meticulously the guards searched through his clothes and cell every day. How refusing to eat only meant a trip back to the sick ward and a tube shoved up his nose, along with more loneliness. It was the isolation that broke him down. When he realised he couldn’t die in PC or the clinic, the idea of getting out to gen pop with lots of death threats literally walking around on two legs, seemed very tempting. Problem was, he hadn’t counted on Tully – or Tully’s death.

“Oh, hon…”

Fuck, is he crying again? Or is it the water from the ewer? He’s sitting down on the stairs, face buried in his palms because the shame is too much to show even for the trees. There are so many signs of his betrayal, his cowardice, his weakness, his shame all over his body. A map over his transgressions, his path to the downfall and failure he’ll never be able to leave behind. That’s what walking around breathing, feeling and thinking has been like for years and always will be.

“Talk to me, Juice.”

What’s there to say? To Venus, to Chibs, to anyone. *I never meant to hurt the club?* Who gives a fuck? People are dead because of him and there’s no way of telling when the punishment is done, if the debt can ever be paid in full. He cried himself to sleep every night from the day the ink removal started, until it was done. It wasn’t the physical pain, Tully made sure he got all the good stuff to keep it to a minimum, but the emotional was a whole other thing no amount of oxy, benzo or moonshine could numb. And if Juice had thought the shot caller would hit or rape his pet to silence, he was wrong.

It’s a memory so infected, it will probably never stop fucking with his mind. The sudden care for boundaries, a rapist turning into a comforter. Tully didn’t rape him once during the ink removal, didn’t beat or threaten him, or even showed annoyance with his punk’s miserable state. He was there, like a silent guardian waiting for his toy to heal, but the man was also capable of care. It could’ve been fake, Tully was one hell of a manipulator, but he never used Juice for his business and life would be hell on Earth for any con trying anything with the shot caller’s punk.

That’s the wound that wont heal. The way Juice was slowly teared apart, body and mind, first by Jax and then Tully. Or to be fair, it started long before that, this tug-of-war he was never strong enough to win because he wasn’t the one doing the tugging, only trying to keep his footing, too stupid to realise he was pushed and pulled. He knows now what it costs to be pliable.
Déjà vu. A stupid fucking expression, but the only one fitting that doesn’t include rage, sorrow, frustration and heartache. Or aching fists. He didn’t remove the rings this time and the target of their efficient lesson doesn’t whimper, only grunt. Violence is a tool best used when you have your head clear and re-calling Juice’s almost pathetic acceptance of the punishment is the only thing keeping Chibs within limits. And Hap being Hap, is loyal to a fault to the Reaper but also, even three years from the Mayhem vote, to Jax. Or his memory.

Chibs isn’t as fit as the Tacoma killer, but his status as president makes Happy accept the punishment, just as Juice did. In a real fight, Chibs is very much aware of that he most likely would’ve lost against Juice that time in the garage, and with absolute certainty this time, but that’s not how punishment beatings work. To Happy, it’s not Chibs who personally has a beef with him, but the pres and by extent, the club. And he’s smart enough to know Chibs isn’t the least keen on listening to any explanations until the punishment is done.

When Happy’s nose, lips, left cheekbone and eyebrow are thoroughly messed up and Chibs’s steel toe-caps have made sure he’ll limp for at least a week, Happy is finally loosing some of his stamina and sinks to the floor, panting. Getting the man to that state, is about equal to have most other brothers screaming and crying. Unlike the time when he hauled a sniffling but accepting Juice to his feet, dragging him along to tend to his wounds, Chibs doesn’t feel like he’s accomplished anything but a simple payback now. What a fool he was back then, thinking he’d done things right with Juice, when all de did was acting out on his own frustration, actually believing it made any difference to the better.

Chibs looks down at his fist, the rings colored by blood and they’ve sunken into the flesh of his fingers, marked them by every punch. There will be bruises and why not. After all, he deserves to be punished too. He grabs Happy’s shoulder and the man, being the kind of pack animal he is, looks up at his leader, accepting whatever order or scorn as long as Chibs speaks as his president. The problem is, they both know that’s impossible and that’s why they’re here. Chibs hauls him to his feet, dragging him along to the couch and roughly makes him sit. Then he goes to wash his hands meticulously and getting his first aid kit.

Washing and stitching Happy’s face back into a somewhat less messy state, is a very silent business. It doesn’t even seem like the battered brother has any problems keeping his shit together, which is one of the reasons his reputation is what it is. Happy isn’t trying to be a stonecold badass, he doesn’t have to put on a show to live up to the image of the Tacoma killer, because it’s who he is and he doesn’t feel conflicted about it in any way. He’s not a man doubting himself or questioning his heart and mind. Happy is the kind of man who knows exactly who he is and to whom inner changes are so rare there’ll never be a pattern for him to follow. He can dig up whatever small attacks of weed with the roots, not thinking twice about it, and just keep walking in the Reaper’s direction. In many ways, a perfect tool for Jax, but unlike Juice, not very likely to be threatened into obedience. A man who doesn’t have secrets, doesn’t thrive on psychological power and doesn’t show any shame for taking such pleasure in violence, is almost impossible to turn into the kind of tool Jax would mold Juice into.

Chibs puts the last piece of plaster over the stitches, since a beating is one thing and an infection something else entirely, and sighs.

“Were ye goin’ to kill’im?”
“Not sure.”

And there he is, the Happy Chibs knows and trusts with his life. With the sometimes chilling honesty, lacking any trace of compassion and making people, even brothers who’ve known him for years and trusting him with their lives, uneasy. The expression Chibs has seen on almost every brother’s face after witnessing Happy in full action for the first time, unable to hide the shock and incredulity. In time it will become less shocked, but as Tig once told Chibs after a job working mostly with Hap, the man’s presence makes him feel like the normal one. Happy shrugs, looking through his pocket for his smokes with a quite successfully hidden grimace.

“He’s a rat, Chibs.”
“S’not tha’ simple.”
“Since when?”

Yeah, since when? Chibs grits his teeth, looking at his miscolored knuckles. Once again, he’s reminded of Juice, this time at the diner. How the kid was practically bleeding with the need to explain, to confess and maybe, just maybe, be forgiven. Chibs refused and although he didn’t choose Juice’s path for him, he knows that despite trying to lock it away for three years, the guilt for letting his own emotions block any chance, no matter how small, for Juice to make amends, is still there and won’t fade. Wearing the Reaper, doesn’t mean you’re dead inside.

“You’re distracted, pres.”
“I know. Still, ye ignored the vote.”
“You visited him without taking it to the table first.”
“I did.”
“So how’s that any different?”

Thing is, it isn’t. Not in the world of black and white Happy lives and Chibs used to live in. Greyscales paints a far more fair picture of the world, but they also make it far less easy to not step away from the given path. Apart from his mother, perhaps, Happy has never loved another human being even close to as much as he loves the Reaper. He is the mirror where Chibs can see his own lack of commitment to the club, just as Chibs once was Juice’s. The reflections are merciless, sharp and ugly.

“Ye agreed not to hurt him, Hap.”
“And you never told us you cared so much.”

Chibs doesn’t know what to say, because anything but the truth will be a lie and right now he can’t tell what would be more devastating. Happy takes a long blow on his fag, letting the smoke out slowly, trying to keep the movement of his broken cheek bone to a minimum.

“I know about you, pres. Never told anyone, in case you wonder, and I never will. Unless it hurts the club.”
“What are ye talking about, Hap?”
“You and Juice. Haven’t seen you together, really, but I don’t have to. It’s obvious you have a new commitment now, pres.”

It’s a shock to hear it. The bitterness, the disappointment, the flat out grief in Happy’s usually so even voice. It hurts, worse than Chibs even with all his pride and love for the patch, is prepared for. And he has nothing to say in his defence. Happy’s eyes are brimming with the kind of wounded pride Chibs felt when he turned his back on Juice before Jax sent him on the suicide mission. Happy took his punishment, now it’s Chibs’ turn and the price won’t be paid in blood and bruises, but with an
amputation.

“I’ll keep him safe, Chibs. I’ll honor the vote and keep the white trash off him and us, but you gotta cut whatever personal shit you have with the rat. You can’t see him, ever again.”
Chapter 65

Chapter Summary

Have been a bit busy - again - with stuff, but the angst is back :)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

This is his own fault. For letting his guard down, for starting to hope. For allowing anyone to treat his walking corpse as something more than just that. He can see the pain in the man’s face, hear it in his broken voice, but it doesn’t matter. In the end, as Juice should’ve known, never should’ve let himself stop believe in, the Reaper must have his share.

*You promised.* *You promised you wouldn’t leave, wouldn’t turn away from me again!* He wants to scream at the man who’s sunken down on the bed, knuckles miscoloured from bruises and blood that clearly isn’t his own. But he can’t. He’s numb, uncapable of anything but staring in front of him, seeing nothing and hearing too much. It seems like no matter how many times the history repeats itself, Juice Ortiz wont learn from it.

“You’ll be safe, Juice. Hap gave me his word.”

And unlike Juice, Happy is trustworthy. Chibs gives him an exasperated look.

“Please, just hear me out, lovey.”
“Like you listened to me at the diner?”
“Ye’d betrayed us.”
“And you promised not to leave me!”

He’s shoving Chibs away, the man’s too close and in the next second, Juice is slapped in the face, hard and sudden, the force in it causing him to almost loose balance.

“Christ…”

His ear is ringing, his cheek heating and the arm catching him before his head smashes into the wall by the unintentional strenght of Chibs’ hand. It’s not a fist, just the back of a hand, strong as it may be, but to Juice’s wrecked body, it has the force of a straight punch.

*You promised never to hurt me again…*

“Juice, I…”

*You told me I was safe with you, that you’d never leave… You forgave me, remember?*

The Reaper doesn’t forgive, doesn’t forget. And He’s never satisfied. Forgiveness doesn’t quench a thirst for blood. A slap in the face is not even an appetizer and this malnourished, battered carcass is a feast for crows – and their guests.
I’m sorry, baby, I didn’t miss on purpose. Was determined to give you a clean death, since you asked so nicely. You’re so brave, sweetheart, but Jackson never saw that, now did he?

Please, just do it again…

I already told you, I wont. Come here, my pretty Puerto Rican…

I’m half-black.

Oh, baby… In here, you’re only as black as I want you to be. Now, are you comfortable or do you need another blanket?

“Juice! Dammit, kid, look at me! ‘M sorry I hit ye, I just… Jesus, ye’re havin’ a panic attack??!”

Is he? Chibs’ voice… is it…? Yes, it’s his voice, but why is he screaming?

Why did you hit me? Will you hit me again? You’re leaving me… You’re leaving me alone…

The force of the fit will never cease to surprise him. It’s a shock to the system, wrecking him inside out and there’s nothing and noone to hold onto. Only himself. Juice is locked so tight he can’t move. He’s curled to a ball of complete and utter panic and squeezing tighter is the only thing keeping him from explode. If he can just hold onto a living body, even if it’s his own, he’s not alone.

It’s an old trick since early childhood. When mom had to work late and the babysitter rather sneaked out with her boyfriend than watched a four-year-old who was easy to bribe and threat into silence. It’s more than thirty years ago, but his mind isn’t much more useful than a small child’s now, so it works. If he’s holding on tight enough and starts counting, just counting as far as he can, he’ll eventually fall asleep and when he wakes up, mom will be there and instead of scrawny, scraped knees, he’ll hug her warm, soft body instead.

She always made him forget about the nightmares, the darkness, the threats and slaps. She would wake him up so gently, snuggle down with him and whisper promises of french toast for breakfast. Mommy missed you so much, angel and she loves her Juan Carlos more than anything in the world.

She wouldn’t now.

“Juice, please, take this, lad! Just open yer mouth, kiddo, ye gotta… Christ… I’m not gonnae hurt ye an’ I’m sorry, Juicyboy. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, I’m not plannin’ on leavin’ ye, ye muppet! Was just tryin’ to explain shite an’ ye got yerself all worked up. C’mon, boy, open yer goddamn eyes!”

Not all people actually intended to leave him. He made them to. Removed himself from their arms, their homes and hearts. He’s the one forcing them to shut the door, because he’s never known how to trust people enough to let them near. If he would, they’d see just how little there is to love. But if there is anything, anything at all worth giving away, it would’ve been Chibs to have. Always Chibs.

“Lovey… Mo chridhe*… Juicyboy, my little one…”

Carbolic soap. Leather. Scraping beard.

“Ye’re my little one, Juicy… Always have been, always will be… In’ere…”

The beats are a little fast, but strong and steady. Juice is pressed to the sound, unable to remove
himself, just hearing the blood pumping around in Chibs’ body.

“Gonnae keep ye safe, lovey, I promise. If not even two muppets like ye an’ me can make me stop lovin’ ye, I doubt anyone or anything else will. Not the club, not the nazis, nothing. Ye hear me, Juicy?”

The calm voice speaking in kindness and care, the arms folded around him as he’s down on the floor. Rough softness, smells of garages and leather, of a history not that old but ancient still. Late nights, filled with whiskey, burning rubber and the roars from friends, the giggles from girls and the taste of freedom in the air, as if the world truly belonged to them – him too – and nothing and noone could take it away.

How wrong you were, little one.

Chapter End Notes

*my heart
Chapter 66

Chibs keeps telling himself how bad he is at this. His skills are of another kind. Taking care of practical stuff, directing and advising people, roaring them in line when necessary and even soften up to deal with wee children, grumpy teenagers, insecure prospects, grandmas without Gemma’s attitude and suburban moms in yoga pants. That’s what he’s good at when it comes to dealing with people outside the club and the brothers. When his softer side is the right tool to use.

He doesn’t have the patience nor the skills – and definitely not the time – to play Florence Nightingale with a man who should’ve known what kind of life he signed up for, long before he was forced to take off the cut he no longer deserved to wear. Not that PTSD gives shite about reason, honor, patches, patience or skills of any kind. Witnessing it this close, with a man Chibs can’t detach himself from by taking the role of simply a medic, is painfully frustrating and the former army medic Telford, as well as the Samcro president are completely useless here. Juice needs Chibs and Chibs only.

He keeps whispering words he hopes will soothe the human wreck in his arms. Holding Juice, a grown man, like this, still is such a novelty. The lasting embrace without slamming pats on the back or some external reason for the closeness. Just this need for connection, for simply being together, not just for Juicy’s sake, but for Chibs’ too. Had Fiona been a different kind of woman, Chibs could imagine comforting her like this during those short years of actual marriage they had. But Fi so rarely needed that from him and there’s not really been that many normal women – or men – around in Chibs’ life, and even fewer to show that vulnerability openly.

A freaked out, panicking and devastated Juice is, perhaps, the closest Chibs has come to a lover in absolute distress – and all he can do, is improvising.

Not letting go is the first thing. Not keeping him locked and trapped, just holding tight. Arms and hands, sliding but never slipping.

Second, there is the stillness. Not rushing, keeping calm and pray the calm Chibs doesn’t feel, can fool them both. Waiting and staying still, like there’s no one in their heals and nothing calling ahead that could slip away. Staying in the moment and in this moment, Chibs neither can nor will leave. That option no longer exists. So many things he once thought of as close to fucking eternal and carved in stone, have gone up in smoke in only a few weeks. He can no longer hear the Reaper calling for him. The toothy, fleshless grin is still moving, but there’s no sound coming from it anymore. All he can hear now, is how he’s trying to shush a man who’s making a desperate attempt to stop the panic attack.

So many of Chibs’ friends and acquaintances would never admit what age and experience combined with some fucking sense of empathy can make even an old thug biker who’s hair’s turning more grey than brown, drop the façade coming with the cut and the record. The simple truth that makes their women love them, their children look up to them and the closest of friends rely on them when things turn really ugly.

That there are things the Reaper can’t reach. Things the ink won’t stain. When your heart has decided to just screw you over, flipping the bird towards all patches, oaths, ideals and images you had of yourself and other, once stable for years, only to crumble like nothing. Ashes and dust. Juice is solid. He’s warm, he’s alive and the Reaper wants him, Chibs knows that. Only, Chibs wants him more.
These thoughts are swirling around his mind while his body only cares about the other life in his arms and Chibs nuzzles the tense neck.

“Juicyboy… Talk to me, baby… Need to know ye hear me, lovey. I love ye, ye numpty. Haven’ ye figured tha’ one out yet? An’… An’ I never promised Hap… shite I can’t keep…”
“But you said…”
“Hap is who he is, kiddo. An’ he knows a promise like tha’ wont just come in a moment. He knows I know an’ I know he’s not expecting any sudden… moves.”

The incredulous look, the lower lip dropping, eyes still wild from the panic but finally starting to surrender, if not to Chibs’ promises, then to the sheer exhaustion and need for any kind of stable ground. How far he has made Chibs move from the hurt and angry man who told someone he loved, someone who had failed, who was desperate and weak, to eat his gun.

When Chibs holds him closer, no longer really aware of how soft his touches have become, how the fragility doesn’t make him frustrated anymore, the pieces of him belonging to the club, IRA, blood bounds and history neither of them can change, Juice’s panic finally decreases. It’s turning into the kind of tears Chibs recognizes as those who won’t go away with words, only time and patient company. He’s become used to that too. The lack of control in his life he never, not once, would have anything to do with this kind of feelings for another man.

“Ye need help, lovey. Ye know tha’ too. An’ as soon as this shite with the Aryans is over, we’re gonnae get it for ye.”
“They’ll lock me up for violating the parole terms.”
“No. Jarry knows why ye’re not reporting an’ the priest does too. No one wants another gang war in Charming, or Stockton, an’ they most certainly don’ want a dead con on parole.”
“I’m a fucking rat, Chibs.”
“No, ye’re the first con associated with any gang in the area, to be released from a stint without a single fucking encounter inside. Practically a con role model. Ye have a goddamn priest vouching for ye.”
“Yay me…”
“Anything happening to ye tha’ isn’t of yer own doing, is bad for statistics.”

Juice snorts, the tension still as alive as the angst that’s rattling his body.

“Thanks, man. I feel so much better now.”
“At least ye’re getting an attitude again.”
“That’s a good thing now?”
“Aye. Again, sorry I hit ye.”

_Sorry for all the things I did to you, and for all the things I should’ve done but didn’t._

“What will you do now?”
“Now? Well… for a starter, wait for ye to calm the fuck down, lovey.”
“Could take a while.”
“Hap didn’t give me a timeline.”
Chapter 67

There was a time when Juice never would’ve taken a pill he didn’t recognize and that’s a very long time ago. He swallows whatever he’s offered, as long as he knows why. For the club, for Jax, for Chibs, for a slight chance to cover up his own shame. Mea culpa, mea culpa, but in fifteen minutes or so, it will fade and that’s how he survived inside. Interns appearing suicidal and depressed enough to simply not give a fuck, will be medicated. The almost three years inside can be traced back to the beginning via a line Hansel and Gretel style, only with little whites of wonder instead of pebbles and bread crumbs.

The way Tully looked after him partly reminded of how a collector makes sure his little trinklets are all dusted and in order. In another way, it reminded of a gardner trying to keep the weed off his land, while digging up all the good plants with the roots as well. Preparing the land for a new sow, robbing it of both the bad and the good stuff. Sometimes the gardner was pleased with the work and let the sore, robbed soil rest. Watered it, let the sun shine, watched it grow. Always so patiently waiting for the harvest, never in a rush. And whatever fertilizer Tully would offer, Juice took it without question.

Giving up isn’t always laying in the dust, asking for mercy and become a foot soldier without a will of your own. That’s what Jax never understood. In hindsight, had he been alive, the golden prince probably would’ve regretted giving Juice up to Tully. Not out of mercy, but out of pure jealousy and that twisted sense of self-righteousness. Angry and pouty for someone else playing with the toy you thought you didn’t want to play with anymore.

Being held by Chibs while thinking of Tully, is sickening, but Juice hasn’t got very much resistance now. The meds he finally was able to nibble from Chibs’ palm, are working their magic as the man offering them is holding him in his arms. Tully used to do that too.

When the first sense of despair and failure was gone and Juice had laid down on his bunk, staring at nothing and still hoping for, if not a quick death, so at least one coming sooner than later, he’d been horrifyingly indifferent about the very likely threat of nightly rapes. In his mind, it had already boiled down to purely physical pain and it remembered that the nazi had been almost gentle in comparison to the chinks. Tully had come close, had touched him and Juice reacted on instinct, smashing an arm at him, hitting the nazi’s nose. Juice had been absolutely sure the retribution would be both painful and humiliating – and far from quick – but to his surprise, Tully had just backed off, chuckling, as if he’d just happened to startle his cellmate and was perfectly aware of how stupid that was.

My bad, baby. Let me clean up.

In a way, it was easier with Tully. It makes Juice sick to his stomach thinking of it, but the truth has never been his friend. It was easier, because unlike Jax, Tully never pretended to be anything he wasn’t. A nazi rapist who didn’t care for race when it stood in the way for more important goals with the color of green. He didn’t lie, didn’t need to and as long as Juice’s body and mind were trapped gently enough, it could even be a relief not having to be alone with his thoughts. Tully was gentle but quick, didn’t drag it out and when he was done, he listened, was actually interested in a way, and had all the time in the world for someone who only wanted his time to end.

Juice talked. He’s not really sure about what, he was mostly on something, but he knows he did spill lots of shit out. No club secrets, incredibility enough, but Tully’s presence was like a sickling but gentle furnace, not leaving any room for lying or hiding. Blessed by whatever substance the shot
caller could get his hand on, Juice would talk. About his nightmares, about his crimes, the
transgressions Tully refused to let him pay for with his death. The punishment being a dragged out
pain instead, a long confession, a neverending line of Hell Marys to pray for a forgiveness Tully
couldn’t give. He could only add to the punishment by not stopping the rapes. By then, Juice was so
far gone from any kind of self-value, he could pretend it didn’t matter.

“Don’t have to hide, kiddo. Cry all ye need.”

Chibs’ voice is not Tully’s – and not Jax’s – in any way. There’s not a trace of manipulation there,
no false concern, no underlying smile of a predator knowing he’s lured the prey into his trap. Chibs
is all about control, but controlling others minds, no. That’s why Juice set his hoped on him at the
diner. Because he knew there would be no manipulations, only straight forward bluntness. He’d just
not counted on how much it would hurt to be rejected.

Telling him about Hap is Chibs Telford’s way. Keeping a secret like this from the club, simply isn’t
who this man is, and Juice doesn’t want him to be something he isn’t. He tried that for himself and
the result is anything but pretty. The result of Chibs’ honesty is breaking Juicce down, but considering
how little he seems to know about himself and his own miserable life, it’s also a bit reassuring to see
the Scot back in order. Juice knows his old brother and hiding something like this even for a couple
of months, will destroy him. Chibs isn’t built for that kind of burden, he’s not capable of it and Jax
knew that. The most reliable person to deal with the shit, would’ve been Chibs, not an emotional
wreck like Juice, but Jax didn’t want stability, he didn’t want a lasting solution for the club. He just
wanted a tool for his rage.

During a very long time, noone touched Juice even remotely close to this. As the relaxation finally
starts coming, Chibs moves him to sit with his legs dangling over his thigh. Literally in the man’s lap,
only sideways and with the weight of an arm firmly around his shoulders. Maybe it’s childlike, or
gay, or just fucking silly, but the feeling of the Scot’s closeness, the way he practically cradles him,
finally makes Juice feel safe again, in a way the meds solely can’t.

“Begged him to take me out…”

Apparantly, they still make him talk. Chibs brushes his mouth over his hair, a silent encouragement
to keep talking.

“He… when he didn’t, I was just laying in my bunk for weeks… Waiting. He told me he’d reached
out to you…”
“He did. An’ the Mayhem vote…”
“I know you couldn’t stop it, Chibs, and you had no reason to.”
“Had I listened…”
“You weren’t even pres then. Don’t go there. Please.”

It’s heavy enough to carry his own guilt. He’s too tired to share Chibs’ too, and hearing about it will
make Juice share it, because he’d do anything to spare someone that burden. And right now, he’s not
strong enough to take that one on too. He swirrs his fingers together with the other man, squeezing.

“I’ve spent years just dwelling in what I did to the club. What I did to Jax, to you… to Miles. Trust
me, Chibs, you don’t want to go there. It’s pointless and it’ll trash your mind.”
“Why don’t ye want me dead?”
“You’re not really the right person to ask me that.”
“No?”
Juice almost laughs. The obliviousness of Chibs’ actions sometimes really is funny. In a very dark and twisted way.

“When you told me to eat my gun… you could’ve just done it yourself, could’ve doled out club justice right there and then, could’ve done it anytime after Jax met Mr. Mayhem, but you didn’t. You’re not some fucking sadist, Chibs. I knew you didn’t sanction what Jax decided for me and don’t tell me you never had a chance to make some Son on pen time do the work. I’m not gonna hold your own decency against you and I’m sure as hell not trying to justify what I did or make me look less of a shitty rat, but trust me, you don’t have enough self-loathing to survive what I went through. You’re just… too fucking naïve.”

Of all the things he could throw at Chibs… But Juice doesn’t care anymore. He’s done with lying and there’s a freedom in that. Hiding and concealing are like internal organs, they won’t go away, but openly, purposefully lying is just something Juice can’t do. The time with Tully, being under that equally preying and non-judging gaze, like a living microscope, erased his capability of that kind of lying. When you’re picked apart, piece by piece, and you can’t do anything to stop it, there’s no point in lying anymore. You belong to the one looking at you and the last weapon when you’re too broken and exhausted to conceal anything, is putting it all on display, praying the full view of your sins and faults will be enough for another death sentence.

The last thing Juice wants, is to hold that kind of power over another human being. He can almost see Tully before him, hearing the conversations while staring at that blank, emotionless face. The one with Chibs, the one in Juice’s mind.

“He let me talk. Listened to me…”

For hours. The pills sure made Juice talkative, but mostly it was Tully who made him open up. He would only stop his punk if the subject came too close to club secrets – apparently, the nazi wasn’t interested in using him that way – and whatever shit Juice shared, it wasn’t used as leverage. The rapes became less frequent, lasted shorter, as if Tully had grown tired of his punk but just did it to blow off some steam. By then, Juice didn’t even care. His body had long since stopped being anything he had any say in. But Tully cared, in his own completely fucked up and cruel way.

“The ink… he took care of it… And everything else…”

Eating, sleeping, working out. Like a walking puppet. Using him as a weapon, an obedient tool, would’ve been the natural thing for a psychopathic shot caller to do, but Tully wasn’t Jax and had his own ideas of how to make the most of the ownership.

A pet project. Examine the pieces of some wreck he’d inherited, trying to put it back together, see what fit, what could be mended and what had to be thrown away. Erased. Creating a puppy to keep him company, apparently was far more challenging than simply breaking down and fuck something already broken. Tully never needed him to do his job as a shot caller, or even to get sexual release. There were plenty of more or less willing holes, far prettier and definitely far whiter, than Juice inside and Tully had enough money and power to set up private meetings with them.

“Man, you really must despise me now…”

He’s barely aware of it. That he’s trying to make the decision easier for the man. Putting Tully’s sloppy seconds on display in it’s full ugliness. Rotten meat, given a more appetizing surface with the help of preserving chemicals and color, re-packed in plastic hiding the smell, with a stamp lying about the expiring date. Something that will make Chibs let go of this impossible balance act, call
Happy and tell him it’s done. The decision Juice somewhere, despite the pleas and hopes, has known would come eventually.

He’s not trying to be brave or selfless. He knows all too well, the meds do most of the calm now. They’re the reason he’s not begging Chibs to stay, or clinging onto him in desperation. He wants to face the rejection, gentle as it might be, with a sliver of the dignity he probably hasn’t had in ages.

But it doesn’t come. The detachment, the distance growing bigger with every word just isn’t there and when Juice is finally talked out, when all this ugliness is out in the open, he still expects to be left. Maybe not swift and merciless like before, but something, *some* sign of resentment should come. Instead, Chibs holds him closer, having listened to every word, every syllable coming out of a rat’s mouth, because maybe he needs to listen just as much as Juice needs to talk. From Tully all the way back to Jax and everything in between. It makes Juice desperate.

“I shot Miles. Lied about it, blamed it on the prospects…”
“I know.”
“I thought I’d lose my cut, like the fucking idiot I was, thinking that my old man’s goddamn color would be worse than shooting a brother to cover up stealing from the club. For a fucking cop…”
Chapter 68

They should never have patched Juice in. Clay openly said he didn’t trust him and ironically, he was the one to place his own future in Juice’s hands when it actually mattered. Even if he probably knew the kid would crack. Maybe he really did care about Juice. Maybe the ex-communicated pres just wanted to take once last chance to get away. Maybe Juice was simply the right tool for it. Who else would’ve had that much to lose?

Chibs’ memory isn’t quite as sharp as it used to be, thanks to too many bottles, explosions and hits to the head, but with the veils of anger, betrayal and self-pity finally parting enough for some honest fucking thinking to shine through, the true colors of the cut he’s been wearing with love and pride for almost two decades, appear bleak and unappealing.

Using someone to achieve a goal, is not something Chibs thinks twice about – when it’s about grown ass people outside family. That’s a code of honor and decency he once thought he shared with all his brothers, since the True IRA and Jimmy O. experience clearly didn’t make him cynical enough. You don’t use kids, within or outside the club, for any reason. You also don’t hurt women, although the idea of what hurting actually means, clearly differs among some of them. Criminals and cops who are women, are a whole other story. They’re not primarily wives, mothers and daughters, but dangerous fucking people, just as much as himself, Tig or Jax. Otherwise, hitting, harassing or raping girls and women, no matter what age, is punishable by anything from loss of teeth to death in an unmarked grave.

No criminal will ever be successful if he – or she – is uncomfortable with using others. Lying, taking advantage of, prying, manipulating... it’s all a matter of why and how you do it, as far as Chibs is concerned. He’s never felt bad for stealing, sabotaging or even killing, when it’s been justified, because he might not be a sociopath, but he’s still a goddamn criminal and no one will ever make Chibs Telford apologize for that. He knows what he chose and stands for it. His loyalty not only to the cut, but to the life he lives, so clear not even jumping the hay with a cop made him wither. Juice is another type of criminal, entirely. So were Jax and Clay.

No, Juice never should’ve gotten the patch. Not because of what he did, no one and most of all the man himself, saw that betrayal coming. It’s not about weakness either, Chibs knows now that whatever he – and the club – might have thought about him as a weak, selfish coward, simply isn’t true. It’s not that the image suddenly has gone from black to white, Juice isn’t a saint and he’s done his fair share of fucking up shite, but his reasons were never Jax’s, Clay’s, Gemma’s or even Tig’s. They were desperate actions, made out of fear, stupidity and a lack of trust that Chibs has a hard time accepting. That not even when things were good, Juice felt like he could trust his brothers. And in hindsight, although it hurts to admit it, Chibs realises that extended to him as well. The reason he shouldn’t have gotten the patch, is because then he might have had a chance for a better life. And Jax, Gemma and Clay would’ve had one less tool to use in their neverending family war.

Maybe Chibs is getting old and soft. Or he’s just had enough taste of peace and order, to not wanting any rememberance of the old days. The mayhem he was in the midst of, the one brother apart from Bobby the club relied on to keep an extra eye on things before shit went too far off south. And while he thought he was keeping things in order, it all fell apart behind his back, like a fucking house of cards.

Chibs doesn’t despise Juice. Doesn’t hate him, doesn’t even hate himself for not being able to let go. There’s still room for anger, for disappointed and burning shame, enough of it all to last for them
both, but whatever despise Chibs still has within him, it’s no longer directed at Juice alone. He’s finally starting to put the pieces of this human wreck together and it may not be a very beautiful sight, but it sure as hell aint the monster Jax pictured.

It’s not that they shouldn’t have patched Juice in. They just should’ve gotten rid of that cruel, racist shite rule a long time ago, no matter how much Clay would’ve groused about it. They’d have enough votes, Jax wasn’t down the spiral yet and Chibs can’t think of anyone but Clay, except maybe Happy, who’d have anything against black people in the club by the time and, as the simple man he is, only because he was used to a certain way of handling the club and wouldn’t have gone up against Clay unless it was necessary. Thinking that so much of this shite could’ve been avoided, had Juice not been so shit-scared of loosing the only family he had, due to a heritage he couldn’t change, is disturbing to say the least.

“Please, say something… Do something, Chibs…”

_Yell at me. Beat me. Shoot me. Kick me out in the woods. Just don’t tell me to leave. To eat my gun. I’m not good on my own._

The acceptance. It’s only now, when Chibs is forcing his almost forty years old instinct to punch the lights out of the wee idiot, the man who was once his brother, then the traitor and now something else entirely, something neither Chibs nor Juice himself know yet. What kind of place had the club become, when a patched member who up until then had been as loyal as any of them, was ready to take such desperate measures, before talking?

Chibs used to think, still does to some extent, that it was due to Juice’s lack of trust, an unfair view of his brothers and Chibs himself, most of all. It’s not that simple and it never was. Everyone else had someone outside the club core. A wife, girlfriend, kids, parents, siblings. Miserable as a life as ex-communicated might be, they all had some kind of lifeline the Reaper couldn’t touch. Kyle Hobart had a wife and kids and even that wasn’t enough to ease it. Juice had absolutely no one.

The time with Juice, but also the long time without Jax, Clay, Gemma and the Teller-Moore poison, hasn’t changed Chibs’ moral code. He’s still the same, with the same principles of trust, honor and loyalty. What’s changed is his view of how it turned so ugly and with that, the excuses he thought he had to not hearing Juice out at the diner.

Yes, he wants to yell and rage. Beat that puppy face into a pulp, shake him, fucking spank his stupid ass red enough to show exactly how little that brown color meant then and means now.

Every warning sign pass before him without any registration. How the hard grip that three years earlier barely would’ve made the man reel, now feels like handling a ragdoll. He can’t feel the too light weight, the complete absence of struggling or even the silent acceptance coming after yanking the loose pants down.

He doesn’t hear Juice’s cries, because there aren’t any. The man is a quiet, limp form on Chibs’ lap and the lack of any emotions, any reactions beyond the acceptance of the punishment, only makes him angrier, only sparks him to keep going. He’s not beating up an idiot, he’s tanning the sad arse of a stupidity nearly costing him something he didn’t even know he wanted.

It’s not until he feels the weight slip and he’s about to roughly put the man back in place, that Chibs realises Juice is actually trying to maintain balance. Not getting away, but struggling to make his already pain-ridden body stay still and accept the humiliation, accept more pain. Chibs stops in the middle of a blow, the angry mist clearing and he can see what he’s done. What the rings he forgot to
take off, have made with the skin and for the first time, there’s a real view of how little actual flesh
there is on the now deep red backside that eventually will bruise. Still, Juice isn’t moving, is making
an effort to be pliant because it’s what he’s been molded to be. What he’s been punished for not
being.

There’s no punishment in the world that will make that desperation for belonging go away, as little as
it can change the past. All these minutes gave, was a chance for Chibs to take out his frustration on
someone. No deep wounds, no need for stitches, but Chibs feels like it’s the garage all over again,
only with an inexcusably disadvantage and utter sense of pointlessness added to it. He wanted to
prove a point, to make a statement. In a fucked up way, make Juice pay for what happened to Miles,
the prospects, the club… Violence is a language Chibs knows all too well and he used to be good at
it. Good at knowing exactly where and when to use it, and how much.

Still, old Chibs knows what young Filip knew. That all it does, this kind of humiliating punishment,
no matter how old you are, is teaching you how to become a better liar – and how to use your
physical strengh to make someone fear humiliation more than the actual consequences of your
action, and then fear the potential threat of abandonment more than the humiliation. Juice has been
physically hurt, abused even, his entire life and it didn’t stop him from betraying the club anymore
than Ailean Telford’s belt stopped Filip from becoming what people usually would describe as a
bloody terrorist.

_Yell at me. Beat me. Shoot me. Kick me out in the woods. Just don’t tell me to leave. To eat my gun.
I’m not good on my own._

They never should’ve patched Juice in. Still, he’s not moving and Chibs has achieved nothing at all.
Chapter 69

It might seem strange for normal people, but violence has very rarely made him cry, not even as a child. Loneliness does. Fear, grief and even some forms of extreme stress, yes, but violence? No. People have often called him a slow learner, but long before he was JC or Juice, Juan Carlos learned how to save the tears for darkness. How to swallow pain, fear and humiliation and walk away with a grin plastered to cover up either a bruised face, a tanned ass or a shattered self-esteem. When he can’t slip away or resist, he’s learned that the best thing he can do, is to give people a little excuses as possible to make it worse and by that save vital organs.

It’s helped him, far more times than he cares to remember. It’s made him look weak too, yes, but he’s always been able to rise again and before he fucked up his life beyond repair, it mattered. As Rocky said: It ain’t about how hard you hit. It’s about how hard you can get hit and keep moving forward; how much you can take and keep moving forward.

A great movie, a great quote, a great message, but what if you have no idea where you’re going? What if you’re too fucking stupid to read the road signs, the map and the landscape? The fucks does it matter then, how many times you can get back on your feet when you constantly wanders off in the wrong direction? Or walks on a treadmill.

Chibs has carried him to the bed and instead of turning into the wall, Juice spares his backside the exposion and faces the room, curling into a sore ball. The man who has no tools for making things right, or at least no fucking clue how to use something that doesn’t include violence when he’s this frustrated, has a look of regret on his scarred face, that Juice isn’t ready to deal with now. He allowed him to work out his anger and disappointment the way he wanted and that’s it. Silence is a consequence too and as much as a part of him would want to tell Chibs it’s not a way of punishing him, but the last thing to hold onto in order to not loose it entirely, Juice can’t form the words right now. Neither can Chibs, it seems.

The sound of a paper package, of a lighter. A sharp breath, air sucked on through teeth. Was it anyone else but Chibs, Juice would’ve gotten himself ready for burn marks. Chibs is many things, sadistic is not one of them. In order to take to violence like this, he must feel completely lost for words – or worried he’ll say something he’ll regret later, once he’s calm again. Having your ass all but scalped is humiliating, yes, but it also tells Juice that Chibs wasn’t comfortable with throwing fists at him again. And there’s no one witnessing it, no display in order to humiliate him in front of Venus or Tig or anyone else.

Juice takes the offered smoke. It’s like when he, eons ago, was with chicks and took one after sex, but still very much not. He’s not really been smoking since Stockton. Tully didn’t let him.

_I want you bald from razors, baby, not chemo. Besides, it makes you smell bad._

He’s got thick, black hair now and no cons potentially grabbing it in the showers. Although clinical depressed and longing for death, bigger cons would throw looks at him and, unless Tully kept an eye on them, try and touch him at first. They learned rather quickly not to touch nazi treasures and weaning Juice off the nicotine was, just as making him eat, sleep and exercise, a way of trimming him to suit his cellmate. It mostly, when Juice still could feel shit, felt like being a rescue dog who’d had it’s teeths and claws removed. Having his head completely shaved due to Tully’s personal taste, was the least of his problems. Quit smoking was way worse.
No one grabs his hair and the strong brand Chibs uses, tastes a little bit like his kisses. Manly and harsh. Juice knows he’s most likely not gonna be sitting for a couple of days. The rings made a pretty good job and he’s not looking forward to have a look. Or sit.

He’s calm now, because for the first time since the man showed up at the motel, he somehow knows Chibs isn’t leaving. Doesn’t mean Juice is grateful beyond measure, though. It still hurts.

“Feeling any better now, Chibs?”
“Fuck off.”

Didn’t think so.

Violence has only ever made Juice momentarily obedient, afraid or just cautious. Accepting it when it’s impossible to avoid, but it’s never stopped him from fuck things up again, from misbehaving. And it’s never made him more likely to open up, confess or whatever. All it does, is reminding him how his body never was, still isn’t, his own. Family, state, club, nazi property. Prison bitch, expendable.

Don’t cry, my pretty Puerto Rican. I’ll make it good for you too, baby. Just relax, I’ll go slow… Teller told me you could do with a little loving, but he wasn’t a very loving person, now was he, baby? I can make it easier for you, sweetheart.

No, physical pain rarely elicits tears from him. He’s a criminal used to violence, after all. When he cries, it’s due to old sins he can’t forgive himself, inner wounds time can’t heal. The useless regret for letting his own weakness and fear be bigger than the club. The fear of being left alone. Again.

The man moves, reaching for something under the bed. He takes Juice’s almost finished fag and hands over the little creature hiding from the loud sounds of slapped flesh. She’s worried, kneading around for a while, nuzzling at Juice’s hair, his face. It’s like being a little kid, being comforted by the adult who just punished you and lets you grab a beloved teddy or blue blanket. Humilitating and frightening, because how will you know in which moment the hand that thrashed your skin, decided to stroke your hair?

“Juice…”
“Just go.”

Please.

He’s cried too many times in front of this man already and this is not gonna be one of those moments. Chibs will not give him comfort. Not now.

Juice is tensing, getting ready for removing a hand, silencing a sentence. Betrayal has consequences. So has humiliation. He listens to the other man’s breaths, his small movements and it hurts, keeping this still, this calm, when you’re shattered. The weight shifts and there’s a pause, a breath. The tobacco filled air feels too thick for a moment and then, the sound of boots over floorboards, hesitant, the chirping from old hinges and Juice is alone.

Loneliness makes him cry.
If I thought it would knock some sense into that thick, Scottish skull of yours, I’d punched your lights out years ago, Filip.”

“I’m a simple man, Venus.”

“No, you’re an idiot in love, behaving like a frustrated little boy.”

Her voice is low, calm but there’s no warmth in it. Just utter disappointment and Chibs can’t help but being fascinated that a woman with Venus’ past, is able to expect an old MC pres to rise above his violent instincts and be the better man.

“He…”

“Betrayed you, yes, I know.”

She sounds tired, the man who knows she’s a woman. She’s leaned back against the tree, hands folded and her blouse is a little damp in the heat. She looks completely misplaced in the woods, but Chibs suspects the trees are far more accepting than people. Not to mention more forgiving.

“He accepted the Mayhem vote, stayed silent, removed the ink…”

“Should’ve blacked it out.”

“What difference does it make, darling?”

None. Except the level of pain and humiliation. Blacking out Clay’s tats hurt and the result wasn’t that beautiful, but better than a blowtorch. A last act of respect for the office, so to say. It’s a mockery to the club, that someone like Juice, with his trespasses, had his skin treated with care, even if it was on Tully’s order and not his own. How much more out can you be, when you can’t even choose the right punishment, but is left to the whims of a nazi rapist?

“You should be with him.”

“Doubt he wants my company now, darlin’.”

“Well, I doubt your judgement.”

So does he. By God, so does he.

“Didn’t wannae hurt him… for real.”

“Oh, now I don’t doubt your judgement anymore, ‘cause it’s clear you’ve lost it somewhere. For heavens sake, Filip! That boy has been through hell. God only knows how much he’s been punished these last three years. When will enough be enough?”

“Ye don’ understand…”

“You’re right, I don’t.”

She turns straight to him, eyes suddenly hard and cold.

“You love him, Filip. It’s been clear from the moment I saw you watch over that little wall of fame, lingering by a missing picture instead of those hanging there, and it wasn’t Jax. And I understand it’s hard to forgive, but Juice isn’t the devil and it’s time you stop looking at him like he is.”

“I don’ see’im as tha’.

“No? Then who are you to judge? You were there when we went for my son and you got a look at some real evil. Little Vincent Noone is the star of his mommy’s porn collection and still, I didn’t pull the trigger. Alexander, whom Jax loved to picture as a man without a conscience, held me back
because he knew I couldn’t live with it.”

She’s got tears in her eyes now, but that defiant smile still curves her lips.

“I’m not as tough as I pretend to be, Filip, and you should know how well I know the hearts of men, putting a mask on the moment they wake up in the morning. That boy doesn’t have to tell me anything, because I already understand. How he’s been abused from an early age, looking for a place to rest ever since. Juice is so convinced he’ll never get to stop fighting for affection, it’s obvious it was there long before he became a Son.”

“He… he was weak.”

“So am I! I’m not Gemma, Filip. I don’t walk around blinded by blood bounds, ready to destroy lives in order to shape a loved one’s. It’s not my high heels and luscious hair, or my gift for bringing a moment of comfort to lonely hearts that’s kept me standing, Filip. It’s Alexander. Just as I held him up when he was at his lowest.”

A little handkerchief, delicate as her soft voice. No, she’s not Gemma. Chibs loved her, she was the club’s mom, but her way of protecting her kids, was with teeth and knuckles, lies and schemes. Chibs is so sick of such things. He’s never before tried to keep shite from the club, he sacrificed being with his family, risked his life more than once and before Jax met Mr. Mayhem, it was often due to completely unnecessary shite, built on lies. When Juice was at his lowest, still a member of the club, what did Chibs do? Kicked his ass. Had a brief talking in the club bathroom.

“Don’t you wanna stop punishing him?”

“Venus…”

“Can’t you see that’s all he’s doing himself?”

Staying alive was a punishment. Maybe an act of pride, too, a way of trying to prove he wasn’t gonna try and take his own life as a way out. Three years of isolation, of protecting the club who’s pres had pretended there was a way back.

Chibs has tried to forget the call from Tully. How the man he didn’t yet know was a rapist, sounded like he admired Juice and the absolute dignity he’d shown when handing over the shiv. The anger for the nazi’s refusal of trying a second time, had only made the man point out that Jax’s exit in blazing glory didn’t exactly make it any less of a suicide. That the golden boy’s trip to hell wasn’t a subject of admiration of any kind inside. The Sons had made too many enemies, made too many fucked up decisions under Jax’s years at the gavel, to think of a punk like Juice as anything but a useful idiot, a pawn the golden son used to his own liking, as with so many others.

He’d not been keen on listening that time. Mourning Jax, Gemma and Bobby, trying to keep the almost shattered club together had taken all the strenght Chibs got left. When he’d hung up, he was nauseous, not just because of all the shite that had fallen upon him to deal with, but because there was a small part of him that was relieved. That Juice was still alive. That another Mayhem vote was the right thing, but wasn’t possible. Chibs didn’t have to sentence Juice to death again.

“What is it that you’re trying to prove, baby?”

That he’s loyal. That he’s not letting his judgement be clouded by personal bonds. That he’s not Jax, nor Clay. Chibs has been working like an idiot for three years now, trying to pick up the pieces of the mayhem and build something better. He’s spent more time in meetings with his brothers, other charters, old and new business partners, cops, Charming authorities and shot callers, than on his bike. It gave results, good ones, and Chibs has no regrets about the way he’s tried to shape the club. It’s all been on the table, no lies, no secrets, no internal poison killing John Teller’s dream, the one his wife
and best friend tried to kill, and his son was too selfish to follow through.

Until Juice showed up again, Chibs hasn’t questioned himself or his goals one bit. What he didn’t know he felt for the lad, has gone from a barely noticable bud to full blossom in absolutely no time and it’s a shock to his system. To everything he is, everything he believes in, everything he thought he knew about himself. He should’ve created distance the moment he felt it. Instead, he’s been drawn back to the man, again and again. Falling for that smile, those eyes, that fucked up mix of stupidity, intelligence and lack of boundaries. Juice betrayed him, yes, but he also sacrificed himself with a smile. He walked a minefield for all of them, ready to die rather than run away. Juice’s betrayal is so bizarre, has too many shapes and colors to be even close to deliberate. He was exhausted from being taken in for those interrogations with Potter and Roosevelt.

The road to Juice’s personal hell, indeed was paved with good intentions. Nothing will bring Miles back. No amount of beating can change the fact that Juice walked in on Gemma standing over Tara’s body and reacted the way he did. Choosing between a woman who was the closest thing he had to a mother, and her real son, who not only had the ultimate power of his future in the club, but also would be devastated from the truth. Juice did the wrong thing, but Chibs finally knows, without a doubt, that the outcome of telling the truth, most likely still would’ve been blood. The stains on his rings are a proof of that some things never really change. And it’s difficult to be loyal, when the betrayal on the surface is so treacherously alike loyalty.

Without having answered the man who knows she’s a woman, Chibs leaves the trees and their lack of judgement, to deal with his own.
Chapter 71

Chapter Summary

Note: I had to check how old Chibs is supposed to be, because I just took Flanagan’s age and used that, so to say. Apparently, Chibs is only 36 in season 2, meaning he’s probably around 41 in season 7 and since my story takes place about 3 years later, that lands on 44. Juice would be around 36, so that makes their age difference a lot smaller than I first thought.

So, just to be clear: Chibs 44, Juice 36.

Age hasn’t been so kind to the Samcro pres. Neither has Jimmy O. The scars and grey hairs make Chibs look older than he actually is. The life he’s lived, of course is a reason for that too. If Juice really starts counting, the man who instinctively calls every man without grey hairs kid, lad or boy, isn’t even fifteen years older. Ten, at most. They’ve just lived quite different lives before ending up in Samcro and it shows. The differences since Juice’s time in Stockton are far more visible than the slightly whitening tone some of Chibs’ grey hairs have faded into.

Chibs’ urges to keep the youngest members in check, always calling them lads, boys and kids, has been a cause for some teasing over the years. The protective, papa bear style coming up to the surface all the time, but never tipping over to sentimentality or something weird. Chibs is a pack animal and, when given room, a natural leader. Even more than Bobby, he’s personified the watching and supporting, but never intruding or coddling daddy figure a lot of the brothers lacked, in one way or another.

He seems old because he’s seen death and destruction in another way than most of them have. Sure, Piney did time in Vietnam and Half-Sack, poor bastard, went to Iraq, but Chibs has lived in three different countries and been a part of one of the world’s oldest and most violent terrorist organisations people tend to forget about since 9/11, because apparently, most idiots only have room for one enemy at the time in their small-minded heads. What both Clay and Jax never understood, was that True IRA never was a business partner like others. They have a cause, a religious and political fucking goal, no less fanatic than al-Qaida, just whiter, older and lot better at keeping a low profile than nazis. Juice learned a lot while in Belfast.

It’s been a long life of violence and it’s taken it’s toll on Chibs’ body. He’s pushing 45 and Juice is… well, that depends on how you count. About ten years younger in years, yes, but being treated like a boy for most of the time in Samcro, combined with daddy issues deluxe, hasn’t exactly put a clamp on neither Juice’s need for approval, nor Chibs’ tendency to act like a deputy daddy for him. He did it with everyone and sometimes it made it hard to know if it was a personal care behind it, or just his way of speaking to younger men, as a remnant from the army. Juice remembers it took time before he figured out why the battered, scarred Scotsman who looked and sounded like he’d never had a moment of weakness in his entire life, always got so pissed off whenever a member took an unnecessary risk.

Juice almost smiles to himself, despite the sore skin and wounded pride. The man he’s analyzing in silence, sits on the floor, back resting against the bed and just… is. He doesn’t talk, doesn’t touch, but keeps a distance without deprecating. It’s really strange in a way, that the man who actually isn’t
nearly old enough to be his dad, a few weeks ago tried to argue that the age was an issue. They’ve simply lived so different lives up intil joining Samcro, the age gap always seems bigger than it actually is. Chibs is tough as nails, knows who he is and where he belongs. He’s strong on his own and in a group, doesn’t waver or get lost. Unlike Clay and Jax, he also knows when to take the lead and when to sit back. He doesn’t waste energy on petty quarrels or gets lost in his emotions.

Well, at least not very often.

He’s closing his eyes, trying to let go of the sense of vulnerability it gives him. He hates Chibs a little bit for the painful humiliation, but in a way it also makes it so clear, so fucking clear how reluctant the man is to something causing more severe or permanent damage. The inner conflict is practically bleeding from the form leaning onto the bedside. Juice doesn’t really know how it looks like, what’s happening inside Chibs or what the man is about to do with the facts he’s trying to digest. But Juice could, if the man dared to ask, talk about how long months of an inner conflict ripping you apart, feels like. How it cuts you off from friends and chosen family. How you constantly try to maintain balance, absolutely terrified of what will happen if you loose it. What happens inside you when you can’t reach out, can’t open up because know it will end badly long before you’ve had a chance to explain.

The sound of a movement makes him open his eyes. From the small crevices he spots how the Samcro pres removes one of his old leather straps from his wrist, a thin, braided thing he’s been wearing for as long as Juice can remember. It creaks a bit, the knot probably haven’t been untied for years, and Chibs tugs it open, using his teeth.

Feeling the leather against his skin is strange. He’s not looking, doesn’t dare, because he’s so tired now, so frayed from the storms, internal and external alike, he’s not sure if he can take much more impressions of any kind.

The strap goes around his own wrist, just one lap, there’s hesitation in the movement and Juice simply opens up his hand a little, turning the arm ever so slightly to give access as he’s accepting the mute apology. Chibs trying to communicate without words, without rough body language, is still a novelty. There’s nothing normal with the situation, but since when is the life of a Son – ex-communicated or not – normal in any real sence? There’s not a piece of Juice that has remained unharmed from the life he once chose, not a bone in his body not having felt the weight of it. His life has been a long one too, the last years grinding him down to dust. It’s not been very kind to him.

Chibs makes the knot and then takes to just hold Juice’s hand again. He remains on the floor, lowering himself really, staying silent and patient in a way he wouldn’t have before. You’re never too old to learn and as the seconds goes by, Juice hates the man a little less. Hating someone for grasping any tool of punishment that doesn’t lead to permanent scars, or death, is difficult. Especially when it’s been so long since you felt like you had any say what so ever, in what happens with your body – or mind. It’s not easy, trying to re-make boundaries when you’re not sure where they are anymore. After all, dead people don’t need any.

Beat me, feed me, sedate me, push and pull me. Trick me, use me. Rape me, hug me.

*Please, kill me.*

Chibs entangles fingers with him, squeezing a little, rubbing the thumb over the back of his hand. It’s not the touch of a brother, a friend or someone just trying to help you a bit. It’s easier to tell what it isn’t, than what it is. They’re both lost here and Juice squeezes back.
And that’s where they meet. A silent, for the first time completely mutual acceptance of how lost they are, holding onto each other while the world is spinning. Surrendering to the fact that there are no fixed rules, no guide, patch or table there to step in and make the decision or come up with a solution this time. The Reaper has no work here, nothing to harvest because He wouldn’t know what to do with forgiveness.
For a man of Mayhem, Chibs is extremely fond of control and stability. Chaos should only be a means to an end, never the goal in itself. Five months in the army, seven years in Real IRA, another one in Sambel and then seventeen with Samcro. The club is his family, it’s his heart and soul and anyone trying to hurt it any way, is in for a dose of the brutality Chibs’ scars speak of. He’s a rebel at heart and because of that, he knows just how unromantic that kind of life is. Real freedom has a price tag most people will never afford to pay.

Jax and Gemma spoke a lot about family, about duty and sacrifices, but their ideas of freedom were always about their personal freedom to do whatever pleased them. Clay spoke of reason and stability, but what did that mean to him, apart from the idea of filling his own pockets and not having to change. In a way, it’s pretty disgusting how often the little greens decided how the gavel would hit the table. And Gemma… Chibs is almost as conflicted about her as he is with her son.

These thoughts always make him feel a bit down. The number of deaths caused directly, or indirectly, by the Teller-Moore’s secrets and inner war of power and control, is so high. John, Piney, Tara, Lowell, Donna, Greg the Peg, Wayne, Tig’s daughter… and the triad on top of it all: Jax, Clay and Gemma. And then Chibs hasn’t even counted those who accidently came in the way of this speeding force of mayhem or sacrificed themselves for the club, like Opie and Otto. Chibs never thought there wouldn’t be losses and deaths, he’s a soldier for fucks sake, but having practically a third of his chosen family six feet under, a lot of them far too young and some of them completely undeserving of their fate, isn’t something you count on. It’s not natural for Chibs, to try and predict what can make a brother turn on his family, because without trust there can be no real loyalty. No family worthy of the name.

The empty seats around the table slowly but steadily have been filled again, new prospects as awkward as Juice and as lost as Half-Sack, are starting to fill some of the spots. Others not yet patched in are hopefully growing enough into it in time. They have two black members, one tranny lover or whatever the polite term is, the old ladies and girlfriends are allowed to be more than tits, cunts and wombs on two legs and the feds haven’t harassed them in years. It’s the change John wanted – or at least some of it, Chibs isn’t sure how liberal John would’ve been when it comes to sexual divergence – Clay resisted and Jax probably only thought he wanted. Chibs really can’t picture the golden boy functioning in this, in comparison, extremely orderly life. The Sons draw more blood from the mechanic work than knuckles, blades and bullets these days. The king is unseated and the club once again is the miniature democratic republic it was supposed to be.

The club is in order, it’s only Chibs that’s been shattered and is desperately trying to pick up the pieces to forge them back into something he can handle. A fallen brother, a friend in trouble, a wounded man in need of a wee bit medical help, that’s what he’s if good so at least not too bad at. He’s not a good husband or father – but Fi wasn’t much of a wife material herself, to be honest – and Chibs has missed too much of Kerrianne’s childhood to know exactly how bad a father he is. Sometimes he’s grateful for that.

Juice has never looked less like a boy than now, which doesn’t make any sense, considering how thin and helpless he appears – in comparison to when he left for Stockton three years ago. Chibs won’t pretend that he understands what the kid has been through, but he can see some of it just by looking at his body. It’s flesh screaming for rest, just rest and calm, some softness to relieve the pressure on the sore limbs and joints. The price Juice paid for the silence inside, is at least partly visible on his skin.
Chibs starts stroking the wrist where veins are too prominent and the skin as dry as his own used to get during the Scottish and later Irish winters. How and when did he fall so hard? Was it the smile? The wide puppy eyes? They way the kid would laugh hysterically at absolutely nothing while on the right mix of booze and weed? Eyes so bright and weirdly innocent, as if the only blood he’d ever had on those rough mechanic hands was from wiping his nose after walking into a door or falling over his own feet. Chibs is more than aware of how false that image is and he doesn’t even wish it to be true either, but it’s still there. The notion of how that dopey smile still would’ve been there, had he not gotten the address to Teller-Morrow along with a recommendation.

Is it really true freedom, if there’s no room for bending man made rules? If you’re not allowed to love just as much as you’re capable of?

Chibs has seen what love, but also denial of it, is able to do with people – and clubs. Tig is a changed man since surrendering to Venus and only a complete idiot can miss how much better he, and by extension his club duties, is with her by his side. Tig still is the sarcastic, brutal and unpredictable asshole he’s always been, all wicked humour and crude comments that make even the most badass shot callers drop silent in equal amounts of disgust and incredulity. He’s not changed through and through, definitely not, but the haunted gaze and constant self-hatred that used to shine through at all times, are gone, replaced by a look of something almost peaceful. That invisible stream of goodness is seeping down to the club as well.

With the love Jax and Gemma had for the club and other people, it only ever ended with people getting hurt, with the patch being soiled and stamped on. It’s not always a good force and that’s what scares Chibs far more than this sudden (well, kinda sudden) attraction to another man.

Juice is Mayhem. A brutal punch to the guts, a fist breaking your cheekbone, knocking your teeths, light and senses out. He’s poison and healing, unfamiliar ground and homeport. He’s fucking cryptonite, his hair smells like sun and sleep and Chibs may be loosing his mind with him but he’s also utterly and completely lost without him. Nothing in his life could’ve prepared Chibs for this emotional havoc. Loving Juice may be treason, but as Chibs keeps loosing himself to the man on the bed, he also thinks that maybe the patch, the Reaper prospering from the fruits of chaos and living on the edge, never suited him better.
“You kicked Happy’s ass? Really?”
“Aye.”
“Holy shit…”
“Don’ sound so surprised, Juicyboy. ’E had it comin’.”
“Shouldn’t have left the mark, I guess.”

Chibs snorts at that, lightning another smoke. Dyna has once again reclaimed her spot on Juice’s shoulder, nibbling, kicking and pawing with her tiny body. It’s a strange and wonderful thing, really, that something that small and fragile can make things feel less scary. Juice closes his eyes, letting the nicotine take over for a second.

“Something tells me you’ve not really made a decision yet, pres.”

He’s bitchy, he knows that and in a way that’s just as bizarre as everything else. He’s the one letting a man spank him like a little kid, the one getting a panic attack from the very notion of that man leaving. The one in need of a fucking cat to feel calm. Rat may be worse, but weak ass bitch is not exactly better. It just escapes Mr. Mayhem, because He’s got no time for such low lives.

“Ye’re right.”

It doesn’t feel as good as he’d hoped. Being right. Juice tries to focus on the smoke. Dyna’s softness is dangerous right now. Chibs sighs heavily.

”Ye know I love ye…?”
”Yeah. Love you too, asshole.”
”’S more than tha’, Juicyboy.”
“What do you mean?”
’I have no right to ask ye this, for ye to just listen a while, but… I don’ know how to talk about this… efficiant, ye know.”
“You’re scaring me, Chibs.”
“No, no I’m not… gonnae threaten ye or anything like tha’. This… this is me tryin’ to… I don’ know… bein’ honest. Might take a while to find right fucking words, an’…”
“And you don’t want me to walk out on you before you’re done?”
“Jesus Christ, Juicy…”

The man sounds actually tormented and Juice knows, oh how he knows, how it feels when you need to get something really scary off your chest, how it wears you down as you’re desperately clinging onto the hope of someone listening without immediate judgement. Chibs didn’t grant him that and he knows it, knows he may not deserve being heard out, but Juice isn’t Chibs and leaving the man in that terrifying place of absolute loneliness is the last thing he’d do to anyone. A bullet in the head would be more merciful.

He squeezes Chibs’ hand.

“Talk, Chibbie. I’m here and I wont leave. I promise.”

Suddenly, the promise from a rat counts. The hand squeezes back.
“When ye first showed up at Teller-Morrow, when Jax told me he had a new possible prospect an’ I saw ye, I thought he was jokin’. Ye looked like some fucking street kid, I just waited for some shitty hip-hop references. Couldn’t imagine ye ridin’ a bike if yer life depended on it.”

“Thanks.”

“Well… I was a bit confused, lad. Clay had been very clear ‘bout not mixin’ colors an’ I was surprised tha’ Jax had convinced’im to even let a Puerto Rican pay a fucking visit.”

“Jax knew it was the 21th century, that’s why.”

“Aye, he was a persuasive lad, puttin’ it mildly.”

The man sighs again, this is hard for him and Juice strokes the back of his hand, falling silent. It takes a little while before Chibs continues, first finishing his smoke and immediately getting another one.

“When I came back from tha’ job an’ walked into ye, Jax introducin’ us, I was expecting some fat bastard who’d spent his teens beatin’ off in his boy room, still livin’ with’is maw.”

A short, incredulous laugh.

“There was a moment when I thought, ‘Jackie boy is fucking with me, this can’t be our new prospect, he’s just a kid’. An’ then ye threw tha’ big, fucking smile…”

Chibs closes his eyes, shaking his head, clearly lost in that memory.

“I’ve… I never thought, for a second, tha’ it meant anything. People get all kinds of sudden feelins’, t’is how our minds work. If ye let every little impulse mean something, ye’re not gonnae survive long. Ye know… when I met Fiona, all I could think was tha’ I didn’t know if I wanted to fuck her or just sit down an’ talk to her. I knew immediately she wasn’t just some lass with nice tits an’ I’ve never really cared for another woman since her.”

His voice is thick, hoarse.

“Ye gotta understand, Juicy… I love a lot of people. Men, women, kids. I’m an eejit for doin’ it, Fi always said tha’, but it’s who I am, an’ I can’t really stop it. But I’m not the type to fall in love. I had no idea what the hell I was feelin’ when I met ye for the first time, only tha’ I knew it wasn’t… something I should look into.”

The grip around Juice’s hand grows tighter and Chibs rubs a hand over his scarred face.

“I’d never… For a sec I was shite scared an’ then, I brushed it off. Told myself I was just weary from the trip, glad to be home. Happy to see our tech shite getting in order, not havin’ Jax an’ Opie whine about it an’ Clay and Piney actin’ grumpy ol’ men about it.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Go ahead.”

“Are you saying you had a crush on me?”

“I guess I am. Creepy, right.”

“No. Bit of a shock for you, I’m sure, but that’s how they work. Crushes. S’not something you choose. S’not creepy.”

“Ye’re not shocked by this, huh?”

“Well… not ‘bout just fallin’ for someone, I mean, we both saw Tig’s face when he met Venus for the first time.”

“Don’ remind me…”

Juice smiles.
“But I have to admit, it feels weird knowing that you, out of all people… I mean… Tig, sure, but he’s crazy in a whole different level than any of us. An’ I could even imagine Jax and Opie getting into it, if they had no other options but each other, but you…”

“Clubs aint exactly liberal, lad. Ye know wha’ would’ve happened if anyone thought the seargent at arms tried to hump the newest prospect. Jesus Christ… I put a clamp on tha’ one right there an’ then, the moment I knew something was odd, an’ I thought it would just die off on itself as I got used to ye.”

“They say it’s scientifically impossible to keep on a crush more than a few months, before the brain gets exhausted.”

Chibs snorts at that.

“Ye’re a true romantic, aren’t ye.”

“For what it’s worth, I never saw you as a daddy substitute, Chibbie. I had Clay for that, even if he didn’t really like me until things got ugly between him and Jax. You know he forgave me for pretending to help him. He knew I would choose Jax to save myself, but he didn’t care. What I felt for you was... something else entirely. Aint gonna pretend I don’t have some kind of daddy issues, but you aint part of them.”

“Then how did ye see me, Juicy?”

“You really want to know?”

“Aye.”

The man has spilled his heart out. It’s only fair to give something back.

“Had things not… Had I not fucked shit up like I did, I might’ve figured it out. But I was so tired, Chibs. Not just from the RICO case and Roosevelt and Miles, but from all the shit with the club. I mean, I’d not been a member that long when Abel was born, a couple of years, tops, but they were so fucking calm. I think, to me, it all started after the stint when I was set up as a bait.”

“They never should’ve done that.”

“Yeah well… That didn’t turn out how Jax had planned it. Think I was actually more pissed off about him pimping me out before asking me, than the fact that it got me stabbed.”

Because back then, the club was his family and they had your back. He was so sure of it and too weak to refuse, to even be mad for very long. He didn’t even know he was pimped out but his loyalty was absolute and he was easily pursuaded.

“Things started to make me anxious after that, Chibbie. I knew the guys had my back, wasn’t their fault, but it made me feel, I don’t know… more aware. Like it was a given I was the one to be the bait, like it wasn’t a big deal at all. Because I was buff and pretty, but god dammit, Chibs, so was Jax! And later, when Roosevelt started his shit, talking about how the club would ex-communicate me if they found out ‘bout my old man… I know I was an idiot for not coming to you, but after that stint, I wasn’t so sure of my place anymore. If Jax had no problem with making me a bait before asking, and none of the guys seemed to have a problem with it either, it wasn’t that hard to believe I’d loose my cut if anyone knew about my old man.”

He tries to smile, but it’s a bleak one and he knows he has tears in his eyes.

“Never stopped feeling something more for you, but I had to box that away too. The last years with the club, it was like an ongoing, lowkey panic attack. And it didn’t stop until Tully claimed me. Had I tried to think of you in any fucking way, I swear I’d ended up on the crazy wing in a straightjacket indefinitely. You were one of many things that just wasn’t for me. And, you know, I didn’t have a
dad or brothers or even a fucking uncle or male cousin in my life, so it’s not as if I had something to compare you with.”

Hands fisting. This is hard and it shouldn’t be, because really, don’t they both already know, at least enough to define something out of this mess?

“Like you said, I guess I fell in love. And I hate talking about these things, ‘cause I feel like a fucking whimp, but yeah, in case you still haven’t figured it out, I’m probably very much in love with you and it’s nothing brotherly or daddy-like fucking thing about it at all. I’m thirty-six, and unless you’re some kind of mutant, I doubt you were out fucking as an eight-year-old.”

It’s hard to breathe now and as he shuts his eyes hard, his cheeks getting wet and chest tightening.

“I’m not strong enough to not know where we are with this, Chibs. This… thing we have, it’s gonna fuck us up really bad unless we come to some fucking agreement on how to deal with this.”

“I’m not leavin’ ye.”

“Who said anything about leaving?”
He can remember the first time he was with a lass who wasn’t of the hardass, Glasgow kind. The same age as him, but so small and tender, she looked like she could snap like a twig. He was still Filip then, no scars on his face, just a real smile as the pretty, blonde thing from Donaghadee placed herself on his lap, idly drinking from a bottle of beer. He thought she was a teen, but an ID that definitely wasn’t fake, told otherwise. Filip was nineteen, the lass actually a year older.

They talked, Filip had more patience with people of any kind back then, especially a hot lass, but she was more cute than hot. She was flirting, they both were, but she seemed less concerned about how much she showed of herself. There was no real walls, probably because she lived a life where such bounderies weren’t necessary and Filip caught himself wishing she never would need them. That those big, grey eyes wouldn’t loose their softness, that lovely mouth wouldn’t curve into a knowing, watchful smirk ever. Innocence has nothing, absolutely nothing, to do with virginity, he learned there and then.

Einin Morrison knew her way in bed, but she didn’t want to just fuck, she didn’t play hard to get or had any problem saying what she wanted – or saying goodbye. She was a lovely, sweet, soft lass with gorgeous tits and a beautiful, genuinely happy laughter. When they came to her place, Filip got to meet her dog, a big black thing who probably could slit his throat if he dared to hurt her maw. Not that Filip had any intention on doing that. It made sense that a lass like Einin needed someone to guard her. Someone who wouldn’t want a fuck for the favor.

They fucked on her old, lumpy bed. Fucked, but also kissed, cuddled, teased each other just for the sake of it. Einin’s laughter made Filip nervous, because how the hell could anyone be that fucking lighthearted, this happy and free, in this shitty world? He was all over her, couldn’t get enough. Sucking her nipples, kissing her all the way from the dimple above chest, down to her pussy. It was dripping wet and Chibs remembers Filip was proud of that, and relieved, because it meant he was doing something right with this fragile thing. He’d been down on her until she actually told him to stop, before it got too sensitive, and she’d asked if he wanted her to return the favor, but no, all Filip wanted was to get inside her, not waste any time even if those lips were tempting as hell.

She rode him, laughed again when Filip stopped her just to catch his breath and not coming embarrassingly fast. Not a mean or mocking one, just happy. Like she took every chance she got to let herself laugh. It was mesmerizing.

Chibs remembers how Filip got lost in her heat, her tight muscles squeezing around his cock and how she never lost her smile, how she didn’t do any of her moves or sounds to please him or put on an act, but just because she needed to. She didn’t feel any shame for herself, none what so ever, and she didn’t chase, didn’t tease or asked if he wanted her to do anything special. She wanted to fuck, wanted to feel good, to have a good time and wasn’t afraid of making a fool of herself. When she came, she was moaning, deeper than he thought her bright voice was capable of, and Filip had followed suit as this fragile thing widened her legs up onto her knees, practically barking at him to slam up harder, to not stop yet, to make it last for as long as his dick allowed it.

Afterwards, she’d been sitting on the bed, smoking and teasing him a little about how she’d worned him out even if she’d done most of the work, as Filip was spread out, trying to catch his breath. And they’d talked. Not about anything important, just smalltalk on her bed until the sun set over Belfast and Filip couldn’t even recall if there’d been any shootings that night. He’d forgotten about the war, about the army he no longer wanted to be a part of and how the time in Belfast hadn’t made him
more determined to fight for Her Royal Majesty’s cause, quite the opposite. For a few hours, he’d allowed himself to soak in innocence, in laughters that didn’t bore any signs of the bombs or machine guns.

He never saw her again, didn’t even know her full name, and couple of years later, Filip met Fiona, who wasn’t innocent in any way and didn’t want to be, because innocence doesn’t win wars. Filip was not yet Chibs, but he sure as hell wasn’t the lad getting in bed with Einin either.

Now he’s got a man in his arms and he’s not sure of who he is anymore, Chibs or Filip. Or someone else entirely. The last time he found himself even close to being stripped of a mindset, a way of living and being, was the day he left for California, scars not yet healed and his heart locked in a box along with Fiona and Kerrianne, safely tucked away where he couldn’t reach it and break down. Since then, he’s spilled his love, that stupid heart Fi would tease him almost gently about, for the club.

The only people still calling him Filip, being the club’s Irish contacts and law enforcement. Or the slowly but steadily rising numbers of new business owners popping up in the area, who may or may not fear the Reaper, but knows about Charmings long and bloody history with the Sons, and decides it’s for the best to show the current pres some courtesy in advance. Actually, he’s not been Filip Telford this often, since leaving Ireland and to be honest, he’s not completely comfortable with it. The part of him cradling Juice Ortiz, seems so long away from both those men, he can’t remember anything like it.

Juice’s tanktop looks new. The cheap, black fabric fits tight around him and makes his frame look slightly less skinny. Venus probably put his close to empty wardrobe up to date, like the discrete angel she is. The man is ashamed of his body, at least that’s clear to Chibs and the spanking definitely didn’t help. Lord help him, he’s done this lad so much wrong… And he wants him, wants all of him in a way that still feels completely fucked up.

He puts a hand on Juice’s waist, just above the hipbone, safe distance from the ass that will be sore for a couple of days, at least. Chibs once again feels that flash of burning shame inside. What the hell was he thinking? He’s a fucking tool and it’s a wonder Juice is even letting him near at all. He doesn’t look appalled, but this is not the right time for games or guessing. Chibs looks right at him, the dark eyes weary and worried, but still very much awake, watching and waiting. Dark circles, hollow cheeks, too much shite cramped in too short a time. A wound that can’t seem to get rid of the infection, an inner gangrene of a sort.

A soft smile.

“You’re an idiot, Chibbie…”
"Aye. So are ye, ye bloody muppet.”
"So… what are you gonna do about it, old man?”

Consent. An invitation. A challenge, really, and Chibs isn’t sure Juice even knows his own needs and wants for real. They’ve not kissed properly for a while. Chibs misses that more than sex. Another truth tucked away safely where it doesn’t risk popping up. And in any case, sex is out of the question for a number of reasons. At least… well, Chibs is fucking new to this and overthinking the gay thing will only screw shite up even more. This can’t be about him now. It just can’t.

He’s kissed Juice before and it’s been good, confusing, scary and weird and all that shite. When Chibs finally does something about this idiotic ride of messed up feelings, he’s still scared, heart and mind stretched so thin and tight, they’re about to reach their limit before simply bursting into wet rags. He’s scared, not because it’s a man, or Juice, or a rat, but because all of it combined crosses so
many borders at the same time, with the same kiss, in the same moment.

It’s like having his heart, mind and soul drawn and quartered by a creature who, in his own way, appears almost as innocent as the soft and determined lass in Belfast twentyfive years ago. Chibs is loosing hard and it’s never felt so right, so easy to just… let go.
Chapter 75

There’s no such thing as a second birth. Only partial deaths. Pieces of yourself turning into necrosis, eventually falling off like thick scabs being peeled off, leaving scars that may or may not itch as long as you’re leaving them be. Juice has never been good at that. He felt every single time something died, every little piece of him that lost touch with the living parts of him and he’s been scratching those scars ever since. Itchy, fucking annoying things in different shades of red, from different wounds and losses. They’ve not left a very pretty corpse.

Abandonment issues. That’s what Tully used to call it and although it makes Juice sick having to agree with him, he’s long since lost the ability to lie successfully to himself. Hating the source doesn’t necessarily make it lying and in this case, he’s not even sure if he does. He’s never been strong enough to hate. Hate pulls people apart, shuts doors and throws keys away. This lifelong fear of being alone, has deep-seated roots neither Jax nor Tully nor Roosevelt could dig up.

Juice rarely thinks of his mother. Emilia Ortiz was way too young, only sixteen, when she decided to run off with Michael Cole. Her own mother was abusive, her father simply just absent, either at work or off with his friends somewhere, not giving a shit about his wife or kids. Juice has two uncles, Ángel and Miguel, and one aunt, Juanita, probably a dozen cousins he’s never met and he doesn’t have the slightest idea if his grandparents are alive. What his half-sister, Bianca, whom he hasn’t been speaking to in more than ten years, is doing. The day Brian kicked Juice out, she was only nine years old. She’d been crying, scared and with no one to comfort her. Emilia got significantly less good at that, over the years. Brian didn’t need comfort and if he didn’t, no one else did. Jealous piece of shit.

Hating Emilia is almost as impossible as hating Jax or Tully. Brian may be the closest one touching that feeling, but Juice remembers the years before he came along. How his mother was busting her ass trying to make ends meat, occasionally going through the ultimately pointless humiliation of asking her parents for help. Juice remembers one time, shortly before Brian entered their lives, when Jorge Ortiz called his youngest daughter a nigger-loving whore and that a nigger’s spawn was no grandchild of his. They only met one more time after that, at his wife Ana Maria’s funeral, some years later. Emilia had Brian by her side then, little Juan Carlos dressed up a cheap but neat kid’s suit, and although they were sitting in the back, getting in last of all and out first of all, they were still there. In hindsight, Juice is pretty sure Brian was the one giving her courage to do that.

They’d stayed on a distance as the coffin was lowered into the ground and Jorge had seen them but not made a move. Maybe it was out of respect for his dead wife – Juice doubts that – or not wanting to make a scene. Most likely is was just simple fear of a six foot five white man with arms thick as a lumberjack’s. Juan Carlos was eight, wishing he’d been allowed to stay with Bianca at their neighbours.

They’d walked back to the car when Jorge hurried after them and Juan Carlos, for a very short moment, thought he was gonna ask them to come back. Maybe Emilia had a tiny piece of hope too, because she’d turned around, bringing Juan Carlos with her, as if showing her off son, proud about having made it better for him. For having a ring on her finger.

_You have the nerve, showing up on my wives funeral, with that half-breed nigger offspring._

That’s the only time Juan Carlos had actually wished for Brian Parks to hurt someone. To protect his mama, because that’s what he would do. That’s what she’d been saying when they moved into his
apartment. Brian would take care of them, protect them. In reality, the piece of shit had just grabbed Emilia’s hand and pulled her with him. When she’d started crying in the car, Brian had muttered that what the hell had she expected, letting people know she’d spread her legs for a nigger.

You’re lucky it’s you he takes after, Em. Aint gonna let my family be humiliated, so you better keep your mouth shut about it and things will be fine. That kike nose will cause enough troubles for him as it is, he doesn’t need anyone knowing he’s half coon too.

Juan Carlos wasn’t old enough to understand any of those words, but it hadn’t mattered. Something had died within him, first at the church, then in the car and he had no name for it. He just understood, subconsciously, that there was something about the man in the photos mom called “his dad”, that made other people mean to her and somehow Juan Carlos made it worse because of his nose.

Entering the MC was no second birth. It was killing someone the man now called JC, had never met and still was supposed to be ashamed of. A deep wound, leaving a scar so easily infected if ripped open, that healing was out of the question. And JC who was turning into Juice, was so very good at keeping it thoroughly wrapped up. Not bleeding anymore, just itching, and as Samcro became his family, aching a little less everytime he was reminded of his place and the love he was a part of.

And the irony that makes Juice think God must have had some serious plan of turning him into a joke only He would be laughing at, is that the one who made him feel anything close to accepted in full, that his mixed heritage didn’t matter, was a goddamn nazi. Even as dead and buried, Tully still seems to lean close to Juice, watching over his bitch from the other side with that incredulous, almost pleasant smirk and the non-existing eyebrows raised.

Still sorry that I missed, baby?

Juice sobs as he’s pulled out of his spiraling thoughts, a pathetic whimper leaving his sore lips and Chibs’ regretful, terrified eyes piercing into him.

“C’mon, Juicy, look at me! Where are ye, kid?! Christ, wha’ have I done…”

There’s no such thing as a re-birth. Only the reoccurring pain of keep on living.
"Just can’t leave you two alone without things going south, huh? Jesus Christ, Chibs… Weren’t you supposed to stay away?”

“Lower yer voice, dammit. He’s sleeping. Ye talked to Hap?”

“Yeah. Things are quiet at the moment, but the hicks have done some whitey picnics around Stockton. Some kind of Hitler family days or something. Flying kites and burning kikes, you know.”

Chibs just makes a grimace at that. He’s not in the least comfortable, having his VP and oldest now alive friend seeing him like this. Not cut on, boots off and Juice’s blank, sweaty face onto his lap. Too fucking vulnerable for anyone to see. He’s barely gotten used to that damn cat looking at them. It took the maximum dosis of the benzo this time and still there are twitches in Juice’s body, phlegm on the rag from the last coughs before the puking calmed down. And Juice is curled into a roll, head heavy on Chibs’ thigh and arms squeezed around his own scrawny knees.

One moment, there were heated kisses and smiles. The next, Juice was staring into nothing, eyes wide and so far away Chibs couldn’t reach him. Glassy gaze and the thin body turning into a rigid, skeletal mess. Tig is leaning back against the closed door, looking rather tired too.

“Hap will come around.”

Chibs only glares at that and Tig shrugs.

“Just thought you should know, he’s more pissed off by the sheet hicks, than by you seeing Juice. At least at the moment. Not saying he’s got a change of hearts but, you know Hap. Funnier to get a chance slicing some throats than keeping people alive.”

Chibs snorts, unaware of how he’s stroking Juice’s hair. Tig scratches his own curly mop.

“Oh, yeah, before I forget it, your wife called.”

“Fiona?”

“You have more than one? No wonder you look old.”

“Funny. Wha’ did she want? Why didn’ she just call me?”

“Maybe because you’re in the middle of fucking woods and I have your official cell, dumbass. You’ve been nibbling on Juicy’s magic pills?”

“Keep yer fucking voice down!”

He’s hissing between teeth as the form in his arms moves restlessly again.

“Wha’ did she want?”

“Said she was coming over.”

“Here?!’”

“No, to fucking Glasgow. Yeah, here. Your kid wants to see you.”

And since when is Kerrianne unable to travel on her own? It’s been years since Jimmy got a Glasgow smile of his own and Chibs estranged wife isn’t holding their daughter locked up. Chibs rubs a hand over his face.

“Unless ye haven’t noticed, this is not a good time.”

“I told her that. No details though. Didn’t know how much I could tell her, brother. You gotta give
her a call, Chibs.”
“She’s not takin’ calls from burners.”
“I know, so I said I’d arrange a time with you. Sort of a prepaid, long distance marriage counseling. You can have it on speaker and I’ll guide you. It’ll be an opportunity for remembering good old times and set for a bright future together.”
“Ye’re a nasty old man, Tiggy.”
“Just trying to share the burden, pres.”

His VP gives his sarcastic grin and the next second, it dies and he’s nodding at Juice.

“He looks like shit. Venus told me she thought it was shell shock.”
“It is.”
“Fuck, that’s nasty. You can’t keep him up here, Chibbie, and the guys are starting to get nervous. I mean, you shouldn’t leave him, but we gotta find another location soon.”
“Any ideas?”
“The club house.”
“Are ye out o’yer mind?”
“Well… yeah, but that’s not the point. We took a vote, Chibbie, and we’re all still agreeing that we can’t leave Juice to the sheet hicks. No change of hearts, as far as I know. We could keep him in the dorm. It’s never full these days anyway.”
“Hap and Rat will never agree.”
“Oh, they already did. Surprisingly fast too.”
“What did you threaten them with?”
“Come on, Chibs, you know I’d never say anything to threaten Rat. My presence already does.”
“And Hap?”
“Well, you know him. Threats don’t work so well, but as long as you’re not tapping brown ass or hinting ‘bout it, he’s fine with it. You’ll sleep alone, or with someone who’s got a real pussy and a pair of tits.”
“Great. Rules out Venus.”
“Fuck you, brother. Don’t be disrespectful. Especially since my girl has offered to keep your little headbanger company.”

Chibs is grateful. He really is. Staying here wont work much longer and the only safe place he can think of, is the club house. It just doesn’t feel right. Like he’s forcing his brothers to comply to his personal shite storm.

“Hey, Chibbie…”
“Wha?”
“You’re not Jax, brother. And you’re not Clay and you know how much I loved our momma, but you’re not Gemma either and that’s a relief.”

Tig walks closer, sinking down by the bed. He’s looking at Juice, an expression Chibs really can’t read, only a glimpse of confusion, and then the VP strokes a finger along Juice’s hair, making his hard, sarcastic grin again.

“Still don’t trust the fucker and I gotta tell you, I’m making an effort not to punch him.”
“I appreciate it.”
“You should. Officially, we’re doing this to protect the club, but you’re not fooling me, Chibs. I’m not sure if I should tell you to stop this, or not. You supported me and Venus all along and I’ll never forget that, but this isn’t about absence of pussy. As far as we know, Juice isn’t cleared of what got him ex-communicated and that wasn’t even taken to the table. There’ll be questions and if the answers aren’t satisfying…”
“I know.”

If there’s no new facts the entire charter can accept, he’ll have to choose. He can’t have both. That’s not an option, it never was.

Tig pats his shoulder, but doesn’t say anything more. No need for it. They know each other well, they’re the oldest brothers left from the old days. The good and the bad ones alike. There’s no one else left in Samcro who still remembers John Teller but them. Overseas, in Belfast, Maureen Ashby and the second bloodline of the man remains. Trinity. Chibs wasn’t told about that little secret until he shared the news about Jax’s and Gemma’s deaths with Fiona. The same day, Maureen had called, giving away the secret no one really had to keep hidden anymore. She’d also encouraged him to read John’s memoirs.

Chibs hasn’t read the entire book, there’s not really been much time for that, but it’s partly a confession, partly a penance. A begging for forgiveness and a desperate hope of a better path for two now dead sons. Chibs has been trying to lead by John’s example whenever it’s been possible, but the wound the Teller-Morrows caused the club is deep and still too raw for John’s vision. Every man at the table who patched in before Jax met Mr. Mayhem, carries the burden of how hellish the best of intentions can turn out in the hands of the wrong people.

These last three years have been all about simply catching the breath, finding the footing and try to reach some kind of balance again. Had Chibs or anyone else tried to bring up John’s ideas for a better future, he’d probably lost the patch out of pure club self-preservation. Samcro simply isn’t ready for any radical decisions, just as Juice isn’t ready to be away from Chibs.

Chibs swallows, closing his eyes for a moment and just feels the weight of the still living man in his lap. He doesn’t believe in miracles and he’s not about to start. He was always far too fond of logic to ever be a successful army soldier or fighter for the Irish cause. That, more than anything, probably was what made him give up the idea of trying to get Fiona back. She’s not a soldier, she’s an armed missionary with a sacred cause Chibs never really understood. He loved her for her passion, it was inspiring, but ultimately Chibs wasn’t Irish, he was and always would be “the Scot”, with no real blood bounds to Northern Ireland or the cause.

Juice twitches in his sleep and Chibs just starts stroking his hair again. He’s lapsed back into silence, his head simply keeping the words inside. He’s tired too. So damn tired.
Chapter 77

Chapter Summary

One of two chapters with different pov's again, this time Tig. Takes place shortly after the previous chapter, while Chibs is alone with Juice.

"You missed me, Alexander?"
"So much, baby… So much…"

Without her high heels, her make-up and the hair damp from a primitive shower, she’s shifting. Those things she loves to use, loves to lavish on, all the delicate fabrics and expensive toiletries are not as vital for her femininity as Tig used to think. His woman who’s also a man – and a boyish girl that will never, ever call him daddy and he’d never ask her too.

He opens her robe to feel the warm skin. Her sunkissed, ticklish belly and she fights a giggle, slapping his hand away and looks at the closed door.

“Be nice, Tiger. Don’t want Scottish company, do we?”
"He’s a prissy, baby. He wouldn’t come knocking if his life depended on it…”

He sinks onto his knees, a position he ends up in ever so often, ever since she tried to make him leave. She considered herself unworthy, this amazingly good creature who’ll seek goodness in every little scumbag until she’s certain, absolutely certain she’s in position to judge. She, who did nothing but trying to soothe others, no matter who they were, thought she wasn’t good enough for a cold-blooded killer who’d hit corpses and then joke about it to keep the shame in check. He’d sunken to his knees, more or less begging her in his own way, to stay.

Now she’s been his for four years, one of them in secret before Jax met Mr. Mayhem, and it still baffles him because he doesn’t deserve her. No one does. She’s an angel and he needs salvation.

She spreads her legs open for him, letting him fold the robe away on the bed. For so many years, she’s been in control, had to be, and Tig remembers vividly how their first actual private meeting went. The time and place so carefully selected, he felt like a teenager sneaking out after curfew. A hotel room she insisted on paying for, in an area where no bikers, johns or any of their most known associates would bump into them. Because Tig had been so ashamed and she new it. Didn’t judge him. He’d fucked her doggystyle, couldn’t make himself look at her face that first time – or touch her cock. He’d kept his hands on her gorgeous tits, her straight hips, listened to her tantalizing voice and not dared to tempt fate any further.

Now he’s resting his face on her stomach, kissing it all the way down to the still soft cock. She’s clean shaven all over but haven’t used her lotion yet. She wants to dry completely first which will take a little longer now. Tig nuzzles her cock and then lowers further to take one of her balls in his mouth.

“Oh, my angel…”
Her moan is breathy but with that distinct huskiness that makes it impossible for an untrained ear to hear if it’s a man or a woman. She’s both, she completes him, made him rise from the ashes when he thought there was nothing left of him to pick up. His brothers joked about it, didn’t know what to think, how to deal with it and they never – will never – understand how much of the bravado and seemingly completely shameless, careless face Tig showed, that was nothing but a mask to hide a shame and self-hatred they couldn’t imagine.

In the beginning, she wouldn’t let him do this, or even stroke her. He had to beg and he’d been both puzzled and a little annoyed at first. She was a woman, yes, but that didn’t mean her dick didn’t work. Why deny herself?

He’d not known about *her* shame then. His own was still swallowing him whole and in his eyes, what could *she* ever have to be ashamed of? The only things lower than him, were rapists, kiddie fuckers and animal torturers. People both within and outside the club looked down on her and even with his own shame and vivid experience of how toxic too many straight macho men cramped together in any situation could be, it simply didn’t spill over on her. She was strong and fragile, untamed and outside any box he’d experienced. Undefined, lost and perfect. Terrified he’d touch all of her and turn the curiosity, his little ride outside the box, into disgust.

Tig buries his face between her legs, her big cock now filled, foreskin pulled back and tip glistening from wetness. It was never a dealbreaker, he doesn’t want her to hide it, to pretend it’s something he has to abide with, or worse, something to hide and be ashamed of. It’s a part of her and he doesn’t only tolerate or accept it, or sees it as a spicy crossing of boundaries. No, his Venus is one and whole, there’s nothing that needs to be added or removed. She’s all beauty and the only box she will fit into, is one of her own choosing. What’s not to love and admire about that?

She tastes like musk and jasmine, her thighs broad and strong enough to squeeze him dry, but the skin so soft, delicate and smooth. When he spreads her apart, dipping down to taste more of her, more of the one pussy she firmly believes God thought was enough, her cock twitched a little and he has to grab his own by the base, starve the sensations a bit before dipping back.

He loves this. Going down on her, feel her move, how she presses her foot down to stay grounded. Trusting him to pick her apart just the way she needs. Tig grabs the bottle they keep beneath the pillow to slick his fingers when she grabs them and he looks up – down – at her.

“Baby?”
“I want your cock, Tiger. No need for fingers, you’ve already got me dripping…”

She pulls him down for a kiss and he has to look away from her eyes. There’s so much of what he wants there, of the things she wants to give him, it sometimes makes him feel overwhelmed and she knows that, respects that limit without question and lets go of him. She spreads herself, placing one foot on his shoulder, pulling the other knee to her chest. Her cock is flushed against her belly and Tig moans unabashed, like he’s only ever done with her, when he slowly pushes into that tight heat.

It’s a cliché he’s never experienced with anyone else, this feeling of coming together, where sex isn’t just about getting off or having a good time. He will give her anything she wants, go slow or fast, wicked bites or gentle nibbles, every little wish he can fulfill because she’s everything he’s ever wanted and didn’t know he could have.

She’s so beautiful, she knows that, but it’s so much more than appearance. Everything about this woman is beauty, inside out, the way she gives herself over in Tig’s arms and lets him hold her, lets him take the weight of pulling her close. She’s so used to be the one doing the work, the seduction,
the heavy lifting in life, and being allowed to do it for her, feeling how she relaxes and lets go of control, is breathtaking. That she trusts him as much as a woman with her past is able to trust anyone at all and it washes aways the shame they both will carry around for a little while.

Even if some of it will decrease with time, it already has, Tig knows he has too many sins on his conscience to be able to see himself in the mirror without a sparkle of despise. He can live with that. As he thrusts a little deeper into his woman, she’s starting to writhe and her low moans become deeper, her cock now glistening at the tip and she’s getting handsy, grabbing flesh where she can reach. That’s when every last ounce of shame leaves Tig. It will come back later, but for now, there’s only sweetness, only love and he’s not denying himself the full experience of it anymore.

Her hole is a slick, burning vice around him, her low moans vibrates through him as he nibbles her Adam’s apple. Her legs are heavier than a woman’s, but the weight on Tig’s shoulders makes him feel grounded, put in place, but not overpowered. Her strenght and stamina holds him up too. He’s going slow, teasing her really, to get back some of the leverage he really doesn’t need anymore, but old habits die hard and his goddess knows this too, letting him set the pace without challenging him. She knows she already is. Every day. She’s squeezing around him and Tig groans.

“Oh, baby… You’re close?”
"Yes… God, yes, Alexander… My sweet boy…"

He takes her cock, stroking it lazily as he speeds up again and his man who knows she’s a woman, is grabbing his shoulders, digging her nails in almost painfully and Tig’s blood starts rushing, all the sensations making him hyper alert, the sweet and brusque alike, and his goddess comes with that breathy, almost singing gasp he’s learned isn’t the played act of a professional whore, but genuine and for him alone. Her cock twitches beautifully as she comes over his chest and then she clenches around him, just once, locking him down really, before releasing him again and just lets go, pulling her legs around his waist as he pounds himself home.

She’s tired, his baby, and when they’ve catched their breaths, she curls herself like a cat in bed. Tig pulls the thin sheet over her, knowing she’ll appreciate it as the sweat dries. She’s resting her head on his chest, the love goddess tucked away for now, and there’s just this tired, lax girl who no longer has to put on a brave face and pretend she doesn’t need what she’s given other so many times. The sense of safety, of being held and cared for. Being something more than a means to an end for others to get off, get some excitement, cross boundaries or being told everything’s gonna be alright.

Tig buries his nose in her still damp hair and just lays still, listening to her calm, even breaths for a while. He understands Chibs, more than the idiot can imagine. Venus isn’t a rat, no. There’s no comparison between her and Juice in that regard, but Tig is sick of making club decisions based on Jax Teller’s legacy, sick of the old wounds getting teared up again. He’s also sick of Chibs’ last years of dull restlessness. The first six months, even the first year, it felt understandable. They were all trying to get to stable ground and getting buried in work seemed to be helping the pres. It was good for the club, they all gradually got less lost, their grief and weariness turned into determination and hard work. Tig has no regrets what so ever about the chose path now. None.

But Chibs… Well, he’s been lost. On the surface he’s been the model of composure and strenght, but Tig knows him and what he first took as a lingering grief over Jax and Gemma, was about something deeper, something with roots deeper down, further back in time. Chibs has been grieving Juice this whole time and it’s been so obvious now, up here in Piney’s old cabin, just how much of the man’s happiness that got buried, not with Jax, but with Juice.

Tig lays still with Venus in his arms. She wouldn’t be here if Jax was still around. Or Clay. She
knows men, knows people better than anyone Tig has ever met, and although he wouldn’t admit it out loud if his life depended on it, he trusts her judgement better than his own apart from when it comes to bikes and murders. If she accepts and respects Juice, if she feels there’s something wrong about how the club treated him, then Tig will listen because you should always listen to women, especially your old lady, whether or not she has a pussy or a dick.

That’s what Chibs understands and what Clay and Jax never did.
Chapter 78

Chapter Summary

The second of two chapters with different pov's again, this time Chucky. Takes place about the same time as previous chapters, but at Teller-Morrow's.

“Hey, Mickey Mouse! Move your tricycle, idiot!”
“Yessir.”

Most of Teller-Morrow’s customers know who he is. That he belongs to the club and has their protection. That’s how Chucky immediately knows these men aren’t local. There’s two of them in the silver Sedan, the one driving wearing sunglasses and his completely shaven head is sweaty. The man in the passenger seat wears an expensive suite and has a side parting hairstyle, looking like he doesn’t belong anywhere near Charming.

Chucky hurries to get his blue scooter away from the drive-way and takes his helmet off before approaching the car.

“Can I help you, gentlemen?”
“Not with those hands you can’t. Where’s your boss?”
”Mr. Telford isn’t here, sir, but I can get George for you.”

The man in the drivers seat just waves at him, like shooing off a fly. Chucky accepts that and goes to look for Rat. The half German, half Scandinavian man Tig claims is at least a quarter Jew, is head down in an old Buick Electra engine hood, belonging to one of their steady customers.

“Ratboy, sir!”
”Dammit, Chucky!”

Ratboy rubs his head, grimazing from having it slammed up to the only half-opened hood and Chucky carefully stays out of reach.

“Sorry, sir, but there are two guys here looking for Chibs.”
“Well, he aint here, genius. What did they want? And stop this fucking ’sir’, it’s pissing me off.”
”I accept that. Don’t know what they want. Maybe you should talk to them?”

Rat grabs the rag stuck in his pocket and wipes his hands off, glaring at Chucky before going out to the Sedan. Chucky stays on respectful distance, but still close enough to listen. He’s not much to count on when it comes to violence, but Chucky has come to see himself as more of a white trash butler, than an assistant. His job is all over this place. The garage, the yard, the kitchen… Wherever he can be of help, he’ll give a hand, even if he literally doesn’t have any. Not real ones, at least.

“I don’t know. He’s had some family business to deal with lately.”

Family business? Chucky knows he shouldn’t be eavesdropping, but no way in hell Chibs is with his family. Chucky should know, because Miss Larkin – or is it Mrs. Larkin? Mrs. Telford? Who
knows? – called again this morning, threatening to skin her husband alive if he didn’t call her back. Chucky has no doubts she’d go through with it. She’s the kind of woman who means her threats literally and not that Chibs’ skin wouldn’t need a makeover, but removing it is just cruel and not something Chucky will accept. He may not be hired for his brain, but he’s not a complete idiot.

While continuing with his job – now wiping off the picnic tables beneath the playground – Chucky still is close enough to hear because damn, that shaved, strutting guy talks loud as Rat has walked off to try and reach Chibs.

“…patching in niggers and retards now? Micks, I get that, but what’s next? Chinks, gypsys, motherfucking sand niggers? That sheep shagger…”

“Shut the fuck up, Billy. You let me do the talking here, dipshit. Jesus Christ, how is it that no one cut your tongue out yet?”

Maybe there’s a real threat in there, because Billy doesn’t answer and soon Rat comes back to the car, looking rather tired. The man in the passenger seat throws his hand out.

“Well?”

“He’s away on a personal business but said he’ll be back in a few days. Three or four, tops. You have a card?”

The men in the car seem to be discussing the matter quietly and then the suit guy nods, taking out a business card from his pocket.

“Tell Mr. Telford that I look forward to hear from him as soon as he’s… available.”

“Of course.”

Rat looks a little puzzled but takes the card and then the sweaty driver turns the key without a word, leaving the drive-way. Chucky approaches Rat.

“What did they want?”

“No idea.”

Chucky throws another look at the now closed gate and makes a nervous twitch with his hands.

“Think they were nazis.”

Rat snorts.

“Oh yeah? How so?”

“Talked about Samcro patching in niggers and retards. And I’m pretty sure they called the pres a… sheep shagger.”

“Had they talked about Tig, they wouldn’t be wrong. You’ve seen Happy?”

“No, sir. Not since this morning. He threw his toothpick at me.”

“Gross. You go look for him, Chucky. We need to get Chibs and Tig back today, dammit. Fucking idiots, just taking off for days… Babysitting a rat… I swear, this is turning into a goddamn shelter.”

Chucky gives his nervous grin and the annoyed raw haired secretary glares, implying he better get along finding Happy, one of the few tasks around here Chucky finds it difficult to accept.
Chapter 79

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Trust. It’s literally something he has no right to ask of anyone. Or have. Out of all the things he’s run out of, trust has left the most dried out, hollow hole of all. And the draining came so gradually, Juice remembers, he still can’t really pinpoint a time when it was an actual choice he made, rather than a thoughtless, panicked reaction. There are two occasions where he’s completely useless at making intelligent decisions of any kind: when he’s alone and when he’s panicking. If there’s chaos around him, he’ll always fall on his nose right into it. It doesn’t excuse it, but at least it’s a theme of some sort. A sneer, red from the blood of Miles, Tara, Roosevelt and, although she was smothered, Darvany.

Roosevelt doesn’t matter. Hell, Juice is pretty sure he’d do it again if he had the chance, if not for protecting the club, so for himself. For the months of emotional blackmailing and the fear and shame the asshole cop brought up to the surface. When Juice had been, for lack of better words, in Tully’s care for a couple of months and stopped asking for another green light the shot caller refused to carry out, Juice had started crying at night. Every fucking night for weeks.

It was exhausting, sickening, but Tully didn’t care. He let his punk cry, started to hold him more often, longer moments when the lights were out and it helped. It took hours before Juice could get some sleep and between that and the tears slowly stopping, Tully would talk to him. Sometimes he read poems, Brontë of course, because he knew them by heart and didn’t need a book or light for them. Other times he actually rocked Juice in his arms, humming low on songs Juice couldn’t identify. On occasion, Tully would take their wife beaters off, allowing a little skin to skin contact. The shame Juice felt for taking comfort in that, sometimes threatened to turn him actually insane, but as the weeks went by, it seemed as if that part of his mind simply shut off.

Being Tully’s punk, meant trusting a nazi shot caller and rapist, to not only have his ass, but his back as well. And he did. Leaving protected custody for gen pop, should’ve meant Juice being offed in no less time than a week, tops. But he soon learned that neither Samcro nor AB or any other gang, would piss off Ron Tully by taking liberties with his bitch. And that the nazi rapist actually didn’t want to humiliate him in public. The black nail polish was never used, neither anything else to visualize Juice’s status as punk.

Where Jax was impatient and forced, Tully would be as cool as a cucumber, never ever losing his temper or face, no matter what. He only had to throw a look and people fell in line. The idiot who’d pinched Juice’s ass in chow line, lost both his index fingers and thumbs two days later and even though no one ever admitted knowing who’d ordered that job, the rumor about what happened if you touched Tully’s bitch, traveled very fast. There was no need of any physical signs of Tully’s claim on Juice, because the nazi wasn’t content with that. He wanted people to just know what was his. Complete power, so to say.

Giving in to Tully’s whims wasn’t humiliating, because Juice had already given up any sense of self-worth or image to protect. He’d died so many times, piece by piece, he couldn’t see the point in pretending he had anything to do with this body walking around in a prison uniform. He let Tully do what he wanted, not expecting a damn thing anymore. When he had no more expectations, not even death, to hold onto, the humiliation went numb too.
That’s when he cried. When he had nothing more to protect, Juice would let go, at least in the darkness, and there, at his lowest point ever, Tully didn’t turn away or ridiculed him. He would pull him close, have him sleep in his arms and whisper words of comfort and safety. They didn’t mean anything, not really, Juice knew he was just a temporary pet projekt that easily could be tossed away when Tully got bored, but it didn’t matter. He was so starved out on any, literally any, gentle words or touches, his body and mind soaked it all up like a sponge, slowly building up an unintentional storage of human contact. With Tully there was no lies, no schemes, no missions or tasks beyond spreading his thighs and keeping silent. And Juice learned that being obedient and pliant went a long way with the shot caller. He found himself void of feelings, accommodating to his new boss, ruler, owner, whatever the right term would be for this insane, forced relationship.

But unlike Jax, Tully didn’t change, didn’t play games, didn’t expect things of Juice he couldn’t do. And some of his touches became tolerable, then almost acceptable and later on even wanted. In his own, twisted way, Tully was trustworthy and Juice needed that as much as he needed a pair of arms to cry in. He learned that Tully wasn’t interested in using him as a game piece for his businesses. The most dangerous and powerful shot caller in Stockton State Prison didn’t need anymore minions running errands for him. He needed someone to read poems to. Someone who had no chance what so ever to make ties with others. Someone he could own.

Juice lies still in bed, weirdly alert despite the meds. He feels so heavy, unable to move, but it doesn’t make him anxious. He can hear the wind outside through the open window, the sound of Dyna chasing some kind of insect. He recognizes Tig’s and Venus’ low voices from the other side of the half-closed door. He also knows he’s not lying in Tully’s arms anymore, but in Chibs’ lap.

The man who five minutes ago injected him with some sedative drug, is now scratching his scalp like Tully never did and that’s what keep Juice’s last still awake part of mind calm.

“Hey, Juicyboy… Gotta stop yer mind from runnin’ wild like this, aye? Don’ worry, lad, we’ll get ye through this shite too, ye hear me? Try an’ trust me, ye muppet.”

Juice laughs. It’s a high pitched, joyless and hollow laughter, forcing it’s way up from the pit of darkness deep down where he’ll always get lost unless someone accompanies him or pulls him up. Someone showing and lightening up the way, even if the light is green. The most trustworthy man he knows, is asking him, who’s word and promises long ago stopped meaning anything, to rely on him, despite the betrayal.

The rough fingers are carding through his hair, squeezing his neck, pinching his ears softly.

“Not gonnae throw ye to the wolves, alright? Ye have my word, lovey. But we gotta try an’ do wha’ we can to keep yer shite together a wee bit more. Could ye do tha’, darlin’?”

Juicyboy, lad, muppet, lovey, darling… All those are words no one but Chibs has called him and they push Tully away, back in the box of memories too painful to open in daylight. The scents of the Scotsman clear his mind and he remembers what they were doing when his head started to spinn. He feels his cheeks heat from shame.

“M’sorry, Chibbie… Don’t know what happened, I swear…”
“Tully… and Brian.”
It’s like turning on the fucking tap all over again. Juice has hardly ever spoken about his stepfather. He’s not even sure he mentioned the asshole’s name to anyone in the club. No one pushed the issue either. After all, most of them had some shit in the past that better stayed buried and Samcro wasn’t a fucking therapy session for bikers with daddy issues. Crying because of Brian is just stupid, but since when has Juice started to make smart choices?

“Who’s Brian, Juicyboy?”
“My step-dad.”

Chibs squeezes his ear a little harder, but it feels good, like a rough form of acupressure and the touch, the familiar callous fingertips are helping Juice’s broken mind to stay in the now. When he looks at the Scot, the man looks absolutely horrified and it clicks. Juice shakes his head.

“No, he… Brian never did… Nothing like that. He was an asshole but he wasn’t… you know… a kiddie fucker.”

The relief is so visible, Juice can’t help but smile. It fades in the split of a second and the goddamn meds sets off his canalcululuses again. His nightmares and flashbacks have been so mudded since Tully died. It was easier when he was around to ease them.

_Easier when his rapist still had him._

“Jesus Christ, Chibbie…”

Fuck keeping any shit together and benzos aren’t exactly known for improving your self-control in that sense. They make you calm and heavy, yes, but not much more. Juice isn’t capable of talking anymore, not right now, and Chibs doesn’t push it. Instead he shifts position to cradle him. He pulls Juice onto his chest, arm under his head and on his shoulders.

“Ye go have a good cry, _mo chridhe*. No shame, alright? I know ye’re not well, ye don’ have to pretend with me. No more hiding shite, Juice. I love ye, little one… An’ were not gonnae let the assholes win, ye hear tha’?”

Kisses on his hair, nuzzling. A sigh.

"I’m gonnae take ye home, Juicy. Ye’re done running an’ hiding. Ye go to sleep, lad, an’ when ye wake up, ye’ll be home.”
“Home…?”
“The club house. Venus will stay with ye an’ I’ll be there too. No one’s gonnae hurt ye, I swear on ma patch. The decision was unanimous.”
“What about Dyna?”
"Ye think Tig an’ Venus would leave a pet alone in the woods? Daft lad… The bloody cat is comin’ with us. Mina seems to like her well enough.”

Chibs shakes his head.

"Christ, lad, I think ye’re more worried ’bout tha’ creature than ye are ’bout bein’ in the same house as the men ye fucked over.”
“She’s innocent.”
“Aye, she is. Ye really think Tig would allow anyone to even touch yer furry little friend if he suspected any shite? She’s comin’ with us. She’ll stay where ye’re stayin’, muppet.”
Juice smiles again. This time it feels like a real one, but his eyes are getting heavier.

“When you go I will go… and… where you stay I will… stay…”
“Huh?”
“Book… of Ruth…”

And before the puzzled man has a chance to ask about his blabbering, the meds set in fully and Juice finally drifts away, safely anchored in Chibs’ lap.

Chapter End Notes

*my heart
Chapter 80

Chapter Summary

Juice comes "home". Or what used to be it.

He’s gotten used to the sight. Not only of a living Juice instead of a painful memory carved in to a stone on a prison burial ground he never visits. The shock of it all has slowly but steadily faded and it takes a moment or two before Chibs realises that Rat, the only one apart from himself, Tig and Happy, to actually remembering Juice from before shit went down, is positively pale. The short and quite scrawny member is staring at his former brother from the doorway, seemingly unable to decide if he should come closer or walk away.

“Jesus Christ…”

These last years have been hard on Rat and the recent truths from reliable sources about how Jax pimped Juice out under false promises, anything but easy to digest for a man who’s devotion for the former pres was absolute – and sometimes blind. Chibs’ loyalty never got quite so far, but he still understands better than most how bitter the truth can taste.

“The hell did they do to him in there?”

Rat speaks low and Chibs carefully removes Juice’s old boots from his feet.

“Too much.”
“ Fucking hell, Chibs…”
“I know, kid. I know… Sorry for all this, but…”
“Fuck that, pres.”

Rat shakes his head at the pitiful sight. Juice is still more or less just a bag of bones, at least thirtyfive pounds underweight, dark circles under his eyes and scars on his arms from panicked scratches and bites.

“I trust you. And I trust Gaines and Jones. And this… This aint how we do it.”

No, it’s not. Meeting Mr. Mayhem was never supposed to be a dragged out misery for Juice, club decision or not. Tully confirmed that after the unintentional survival. Jax had asked him to make it quick. No unnecessary pain. What Tully didn’t tell, or maybe he did in his own deceitful manner only Chibs managed to blank it out, was that Jax had given him permission to play with Juice before carrying out the green light.

Juice isn’t here simply because Chibs pities him, or even because he loves him. He’s been allowed back here, if only as a very secret guest – or prisoner, depending how he’ll feel about it – due to a three year old club vote taken without all the facts at hand, and as an acknowledgement of his long silence under pressure and pain. The member that went from a coward and a rat, to an ex-communicated keeper of secrets he no longer had any reason to protect. Previous sins aside, it would be immoral and dishonest to not acknowledge that sacrifice at all.
It’s still hard to grasp how Juice, who once tried to buy passage to Mexico to get away, not only accepted and, according to every rumour from Stockton, walked willingly and with dignity to his death, but even after surviving the death penance, decided to deny himself a way out and never opened his mouth about the club again. The only thing he didn’t do, was biting his own tongue off, and Chibs is pretty sure Otto never would’ve done that, had the club not failed to protect Luann.

Rat is right. This is not how Samcro deals with traitors or ex-communicated members, who’re showing their remorse. Especially not someone who refuses himself the chance of any relief or payback, punishing himself willingly for sins he can’t forgive, still protecting the club that turned it’s back on him. It’s an inhuman sacrifice and Samcro may wearing the sign of the Reaper, but they’re human beings, not psychopaths. It’s a club for the living, not the will of now dead members who may or may not have had the club’s best interests in mind.

Juice seems so small on the bed and when Chibs looks around the room, he realises it’s actually the very same the kid used to crash in when he was still a brother. With eight dead members and prospects in five years, there’s not been a need for using all of the rooms and Chibs guesses Chucky simply kept the unused ones locked unless they had guests over. It’s very tidy though, which ironically only Juice is able to really appreciate. The kitten has been given her own little bed too which, of course, she doesn’t use. Ungrateful lass. She’s laying close to Juice’s chest, not under the blanket but like a little loaf with her paws tucked in.

It’ll probably be a while before Juice wakes up and who knows how he’ll react then. Panic is a very possible reaction. Shock and fear. Had it not been for the indiscretion, Chibs would’ve called the priest and ask him to come. Seeing someone kind and gentle, with no connections to Samcro, would be good, since the club house really is a lions den for a rat. It wont matter how much Chibs repeats and assures his promises of safety and unanimous votes, not with the PTSD shite running wild. But bringing the priest here is too risky. A phone call on the other hand…

“Fuck…”

Chibs groans, suddenly remembering his estranged wife, which is a phone call he really doesn’t look forward to. The priest, though… Maybe later. He strokes the thick, black hair again and leans down to press a small kiss on it.

“Rest, lovey.”

He’ll need it. And it wont be enough.
Chapter 81

He’s not screaming because he has no voice. Just a pitiful, gasping sound, worthy of a panting pup about to choke on something. He knows this room, recognizes the white walls even though they’re not decorated and that’s probably what saves him from having a real seizure, not actually seeing the mark of the Reaper.

He tries to sit up and still half-blind from heavy sleep and a too sudden wake-up, he puts a hand on the wall closest to him, feeling the once so familiar panel under his palm. There’s a small notch exactly where he remembers and despite the warmth in the bed and the room as a whole, Juice starts shaking like a sieve. It’s so quiet, Chibs isn’t there and… oh, there she is. Dyna lays in the soft armchair and looks perfectly fine.

Juice makes an attempt to lift the blanket when he finds that his other hand, or wrist, is having a certain green rosary swirled around it. And in his palm, Chibs’ handwriting in a bit smeared ink:

*I’m here with you, don’t be afraid. Try not to scream or run, mo chridhe. No one’s gonna hurt you/C*

The anxiety softens, just enough to stop it from going into a full, blossoming panic attack. The fatigue probably helps too. Juice finds that just sitting up is exhausting and he’s soon forced to lay down again. He vaguely remembers Chibs giving him meds, more than usual, and that he agreed to take them. That he actually hasn’t been doped or taken here against his will – well, not completely – and he’s not tied up or anything.

He looks at the clock on the wall. Half past seven. Could mean day or night right now. He has no fucking idea. At least he’s mostly dressed. His boots have been taken off and are placed where he used to put them. By the door, with the toe-cap at the wall and the shafts at the room. On the hook at the door, where his cut once would hang, his old hoodie. The backpack stands next to the bed and someone’s even put Dyna’s litter box and bowls with kibble and water in order.

Juice takes a deep breath. He’s not gonna cry. He didn’t scream, hasn’t gone into a panic attack and he’s gonna escape the tears too this time. Whatever happens, none of his former brothers should see him crying and shaking like a coward facing what he tried to escape. Like a prey who’s finally been brought to the predator’s den. His mind is chaotic again, jumping from one possible outcome to another, while trying to remember that Chibs wouldn’t go through all the trouble of keeping Juice alive – and company – only to have him die a slow death in the hands of Happy. Or Tig. Or maybe he’s not awake… He could be dreaming again. Having a nightmare… His mind has played tricks on him before.

It hurts like a bitch and takes one hell of an effort, sitting up without groaning. But almost three years in Stockton prison don’t just go away and he keeps it down to a hiss.

This bed used to be his. This room used to be his. When was the last night he spent here? What’s waiting for him on the other side of that door? Certainly not a warm welcome. If he’s lucky, pity. If he’s not, torture. Or simply just former brothers treating him like pestilence. Being ignored, treated like he’s not even there, right now seems worse than a session with Happy’s tools. Being a walking dead man all over again isn’t something Juice thinks he’s capable of anymore. Chibs has melted that icy protection away, little by little, since showing up again and it’s almost non-existant now. Days and nights of comforting arms and soft words have effectively teared it down and if Juice faces some
kind of trap now, the best he could pray for, is a quick bullet through his mouth.

Chibs isn’t here and despite meds, promises and lack of locks and chains, Juice is afraid. Very afraid. He’s not capable of putting up any resistance if someone’s coming for him and it shouldn’t matter, really, because didn’t he long for release? Dying for real and not just inside? Even a slow one will eventually release him… The rosary rattles as he moves to get his legs over the bed. His whole body swings between lowkey pain and numbness again and it takes a moment before he has his footing.

Small, tentative steps towards the hoodie and boots. Someone’s obviously cleaned them up, even put shoe shine on them. Jesus Christ. Juice slowly bends down to grab his now shiny old boots with new laces and can’t help but shake his head. Who the fuck sits down to polish a rat’s shoes? Who polishes anyone’s fucking shoes in this place? The hell’s happening here? He puts them on, carefully, as if expecting a hidden trap in them. Some skin penetrating kind of poison.

It’s ridiculous and somewhere in his med clouded mind, Juice knows that. He takes another deep breath, looks at the blinder by the window and the small spots of light gives it away. It’s morning. This room’s location has morning sun.

He walks to the small sink, avoiding to look in the mirror on the cabinet above. His bag of toiletries is placed on top of the taps, nothing’s missing and while he foregoes shaving, at least he can wash up and brush his teeth, getting rid of that rancid taste in his mouth. Afterwards, he’s forced to sit down again, but he looks and smell less like a hobo now and someone – probably Chibs – has left his usual morning dose of pills in a cup on the small bedside table, along with a glass of water and the list naming the prescriptions and dosis.

Juice takes them, one at a time, with small sips of water. He recognizes them, thank God, and there’s nothing new or suspicious about them. Antidepressants, benzos, painkillers. Vitamins and iron pills. Things for healing, not just concealing. When he puts the glass down and opens the cabinet, his eye catches a new toothbrush and a new tube of Sensodyne Repair & Protect Whitening on the shelf.

“Jesus…”

He can’t help it this time, he really can’t. Juice leans onto the sink, shaking, trying to swallow it down but it’s futile. Tears are streaming down his hollow cheeks again and he can’t do shit about it, but wait and try to keep the sobs to a minimum.

Someone remembers his fucking brand of toothpaste. No one else used that particular kind while he was still in the club. No one.

He turns the tap on to muffle what little noise his sobbing might leak through the door. Then he sinks to the floor, leaning against the wall and buries his face in the bend of his arm.

The cleaned up boots. The toothpaste. His old bed. Chibbie’s now washed out note and rosary.

This used to be Juice’s home. What is it now? Who is he now?

You don’t buy a special kind of toothpaste to someone you’re about to execute or torture. That’s the one thing Juice can hold onto now, in this utterly fucked up, bizarre and confused situation. But if he’s not completely banished, nor a brother, what kind of rat is he then? Who is he to the men who’ve allowed him sanctuary and toothpaste instead of an unmarked hole in the ground?
The mirror has no answers.
Chapter 82

“Pres, Mr. Telford, sir.”
“‘Yes, Chucky?’
“‘I think our… guest is awake.’
“‘Jesus… Just… tell’im I’m… I’ll come as soon as I’m done here.’
“‘Yessir.’
“‘An’ keep the others away from the dorm.’
“‘Even Happy, sir?’
“‘Especially Happy. Shut the door, will ye? Christ…”

The door to the small office is shut and Chibs hears a low chuckle in the other end of the line.

“‘Yer little pagelad’s still scared of the Tacoma killer, Filip?’
“‘Everyone with any bloody sense is scared of Happy, Fi.’
“‘Who’s the guest?’
“‘Not yer business, darlin’.’
“‘Aye, it is. Kerrianne’s on her way an’ I have the right to know if there’s some shite goin’ on.’
“‘An’ I told ye not to come!’
“‘Thought ye just meant me, ye eejit. If Samcro’s up in any business tha’ puts our daughter in danger, Filip…”
“‘Jesus Christ, Fi, t’is nothing like tha’. Businesses are goin’ just fine, no beefs with other gangs, just… some internal club shite I have to sort out. Ye should’ve called.’
“‘We did. Both of us. An’ ye know how Kerrianne gets… She’s been underground for years, Filip, it’s only natural she wants to travel. An’ see her da.’
“‘Don’ throw that shite at me, Fi. I didn’t exactly leave Belfast for a wee holiday trip.’

Chibs swallows. He can’t say too much.

"Listen, Fi, I’m dealin’ with a partial lockdown. I… we have a guest that needs a lot of peace an’ quiet right now.”
“‘Our daughter is as silent as a mouse when needed to, Filip.’
“‘Aye, but I don’ wan’ her to witness a really bad case of PTSD first hand. I have medical duties here, Fi.”
“‘A member?’
“‘An acquaintance.’

My… lover? Grinning, bouncy idiot with stupid haircut and even more ridiculous head tats. He played poker with Kerrianne and Trinity in Belfast a few years back, remember? Looked kinda like a child, he still does sometimes when he’s asleep and that’s why this is a really bad time because he needs me more than Kerrianne does right now.

“Where is she now?”
“‘Probably landing in Sacramento in an hour or so.”
“‘Jesus, Mary an’ Joseph, Fi! Why didn’t ye stop her!!”
“‘Because as ye might remember, our daughter has come of age an’ I cannae stop her from buying a bloody ticket to Cali even if I wanted to!’
“‘An’ how did our brilliant lass think she’d be travellin’ from Sacramento, huh? She’s not getting’ a bloody cab or goes on a bus!”
“Then go get her, Filip. Ye’re her father an’ ye’re not exactly depending on buss tickets to get
around.”
“Aye, I’m her father, when it suits ye, Fi.”

He’s not fair. None of them are and they’re both intelligent people. They know there’s no use to start accusing each other. Chibs rubs a palm over his face. He feels like he’s aged ten years since getting up to and back down from Piney’s cabin.

This isn’t how a visit from his sweet daughter should be like. Chibs frowns.

“Ye had a fight with’er, haven’t ye?”
“Aye.”
“‘Bout what?”
”Ye know how teenage girls are…”
“No, Fi. Tha’s exactly the kind of things I don’ know shite about.”
“Well, now ye can learn. “
“Don’ start, Fi. Don’ fucking start, ye have no right. An’ I’d love to have Kerrianne over, but I cannae exactly take her… I don’ know… shopping an’ sight seeing at the moment. Ye really think she’s gonnae like spending a week on lockdown in the club house, huh?”
“I’m sure she’ll find it way too interesting, Filip. Ye make sure she keeps her legs closed.”
“Ye don’ trust her?”
”Oh, I trust her, alright. It’s yer horny club members I don’ trust any further than I can throw’em. Just put her on a plane back to Belfast as soon as possible.”
“She’s not dropped out of uni, has she?”
“Not unless she wants a rod to her arse.”
“She’s twentyone an’ all grown-up, darlin’. At her age, ye were hiding hand grenades up yer knickers instead of goin’ to school an’ when ye weren’t, ye were ridin’ my cock.”
“Fuck ye, Filip.”
“Aye, I remember ye used to tell me tha’ too. I’ll talk to her an’ see if I can get her back home, but I don’ have time for drama, Fi. I really don’t. If she refuses to go back, she can stay at the club house until she calms down, alright. The boys will leave her alone.”
“I’ll text an’ tell her to wait by the airport. Just tell her to call me once she’s at the club house.”
“Aye. Or I’ll call ye. Tha’ alright?”
”Aye. Love ye, Filip.”
”Love ye too, Fi.”

They hang up and Chibs groans.

”I do love ye… but on a distance, dear wife… A very long distance.”

The sound of Chucky’s fast feet pulls him away from his not too happy past to his neither too happy present. Juice needs him.

Chibs finds him where he left him. Technically, at least. The pitiful, crouched pile of Juice by the sink is panting, but persistantly trying to calm down, to keep quiet. Nor does it seem like he’s been hurting himself either. That’s good and Chibs sinks down, his knees protesting. Chucky, thank God, has already closed the door, giving them privacy.

“Hey, kiddo... What are ye doin’ down there, huh?”

If anyone apart from maybe Venus hears him speaking like this, Chibs knows he’d sink through the floor in embarressment. There’s barely any trace left from the pres in his voice now, and the angry old IRA soldier is equally silent. He’s just Chibbie now and Juice is sobbing like there’s no end to it,
trying to muffle it the best he can. Chibs grimaces as he sits down, getting on the same level as the
other man, and then he carefully pulls him into his arms.

He’s learned to keep calm, not just steadfast, with him. The gentleness doesn’t even feel awkward
anymore, they’re way past that now. The only things he’s not helped Juice with at least once these
last weeks, are wiping his arse and brushing his teeth. Otherwise, pretty much any miserable state
Chibs can think of, has been presented to him and he’s no longer paying attention to the contrasts, all
the things that were close to unthinkable a couple of months ago, that have become instincts.

Kerrianne can wait. Chibs’ daughter knows her da will either send someone from the club or come
for her himself and right now, he honestly wishes he could give her a good hiding, even if he never
would. They’re alike in that way, him and Fi. They don’t mind threatening with it, but despite being
brutes and killers, knowing exactly how dangerous the world really can be, they’ve never found it in
them to lay a hand on her. And besides, the lass is too old now and Chibs has never been
comfortable with the idea of a man, even a father, slapping a girl. She’s in for a good old barking,
Filip Telford style, though. Samcro may not be the inferno it used to be, but that doesn’t mean it’s
always safe for family outside the club to come by without warning or escort. Especially not if you’re
the daughter to the Samcro pres and one of the True IRA members on Interpol’s watch list.

Just holding Juice seems to help better than anything Chibs can think of right now. The man is fragile
as a bloody porcelain doll, maybe even unaware of where he is or slipping into some inner shutdown
again. Chibs rocks him gently, nuzzling the tense neck and places small kisses on the fetlocks.

“Why the greetin’, lovey? Gonnae dry ye all out…”
"My old… room… Why am I here?"

Oh. Right. Chibs strokes his back.

"Guess Chucky remembered which one ye had… back in the days… Tha’s why ye’re bawling yer
eyes out, laddie?"
“No… Yeah… No, I mean…”
“Jesus Christ, Juicy, ye didn’t think I’d let’em throw ye into a cage back in the garage, did ye?
Bloody muppet… Ye’re here so I can protect ye. So that the club can protect ye, got tha’? T’was a
club vote, lovey."

Doesn’t mean everyone’s happy, or even okay with it, but it was still unanimous. The right thing to
do. The mark of the Reaper is worn by men of flesh and blood, not soulless monsters, after all. And
Juice isn’t the monster Jax pictured him as. Chibs only hopes he’s more of a man, than the cold-
hearted asshole making a brother’s suicide attempt about betrayal and not the desperate act of fear
and self-hatred it was.

He has so much to make up for, if it’s possible at all. But he’s gonna try. Christ almighty, he’s gonna
try. And he’s gonna send Happy and Quinn to pick up Kerrianne. That thoughtless lass deserves
some uncomfortable miles in silence with members she’s pretty unfamiliar with, just to give her a
moment to cool down. Then he’ll allow Venus to fuss over her and, once he’s sure Juice can handle
to be on his own for a little while, he’ll go and bark at her before he can tell her how happy her lousy
old da is to see his only, deeply missed and beloved daughter again.
Chapter 83

He should probably take another benzo. He can, he’s not reached his maximum doses yet, but it’s still just morning and the kitchen area is empty, save for Venus. Those who aren’t still asleep, are outside, having their coffee and fry-ups by the picnic tables. Venus and Chibs have managed to avoid any contact between the brothers and the rat, which is either a sign of respect for the pres and the VP’s old lady, or simply making it clear to the rat that he’s not welcome. Not that Juice is stupid enough to believe he is, but then again, he’s not the same man he was three years ago.

“You’re alright, baby?”
“Yeah.”
“Good. Don’t worry about the grim looks, okay?”

Venus can do what the others can’t. She’s an old lady and wasn’t a part of the family when Juice betrayed them. The only grudge she’s expected to hold, is the one by proxy, on behalf of Tig. And since Tig, for some reason, has pushed for this to happen despite the fact he didn’t even like Juice that much back when things were good, it means he supports Chibs no matter what. That’s reassuring, at least.

Juice nibbles at the piece of buttered toast, keeping his eyes down. It’s partial humility, partial punishment. He’s a lamb among wolves now, only not innocent in the least, and although he’s not gonna flip onto his back and surrender to them like a bitch, he’s very much aware of how little a sparkle it would take to set all things on fire and see Chibs’ efforts turn to ashes. It may not change how the men outside feel for him, but a low profile at least won’t make it any worse. The toothpaste may just have been on sale and bought for the club house stock of supplies by Chucky. Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe it doesn’t matter.

"Try to have some breakfast, love. How about a smoothie?"
“Uhm… yeah, thanks… Could try.”

He doesn’t deserve this. It’s unnerving, it’s scary as hell and Chibs is nowhere to be seen now that Juice is calm enough to act a bit normal again. He’s probably busy trying to get Kerrianne here safely, or talking Happy out of oiling up his toolbox for a little Juice torturing session.

Juice puts the toast down. He shouldn’t be sitting here, taking up club members’ breakfast space and he raises from his chair, nodding nervously towards Venus.

“I… I should probably check on Dyna.”
“Not hungry?”
”Not really, no. And uhm… it’s… It’s better if I stay in the dorm.”
“They’re not gonna hurt you, baby.”
“Doesn’t mean it’s okay to occupy their table.”
“I’m sure it’s…”
“Venus… Please?”

He swallows and takes the small dish with toast. The man who knows she’s a woman just nods.

“I’ll come by with the smoothie, sweetheart.”
“Thanks.”
It takes everything he’s got to act calm on his way back to the dorm. Somehow it hurts more now than when he entered the canteen/bar. He’s tense as hell but at least it’s not surprising. What is surprising, is that he’s able to move at all. He’s about as lithe as a fucking scarecrow. Here the crows aren’t keeping away because he’s frightening, but because rats are contagious.

On the other hand, rats usually don’t hold cats as pets and humans don’t let them sleep in their beds. He definitely needs to take that fucking benzo now.

It’s like a walk of shame, only unannounced and without anyone looking. Juice is almost by “his” door, when the sound of lock coming from the left freezes him on spot. He’s not turning around, can’t move, but he recognizes the steps. Light, swift.

He almost had him killed once. His cowardice and treason made the man behind him end up in a fucking Russian Roulette like situation and Juice bares enough hate and despise for himself for both of them. He let a brother down in the worst possible way.

Juice wants to sink through the floor, the weight of his sins should be enough to drag him down to the core of the Earth. He’s not worthy of even facing the man behind him, but he’s also done with hiding shame that everyone already knows of, the shame he reeks from, and he turns around.

“Rat…”

It feels wrong, saying it. Weird fucking nickname, that’s for sure.

”Hi, Juice…”

He might be half sedated from the meds, but he can still hear the lack of spite in Ratboy’s voice. The low, tired, but not unkind respond. Second to Chibs, Ratboy is probably the one left who’s got more reason than anyone to hate him. If not for framing him and Phil for stealing coke, then for killing Miles and ratting on the club. Juice’s list of transgressions is long. Still, Ratboy simply seems… well, not about to kill him on spot.

“You look like shit, man.”

It’s such an unexpected, normal fucking comment, Juice lets out half a mute laugh.

“I know.”

Juice doesn’t recall Rat being particularly difficult to read before. Maybe his former brother has changed. He sure as hell has. The big, brown eyes are not angry or hard, but rather regretful. Like Juice’s outer change awakes the kind of pity you have for pathetic creatures holding no threat to anyone. Too beaten down for a man with a conscience to find any relish in spitting at.

They just stand where they are, not moving in any direction, not saying anything and just before it turns too fucking awkward even for this already horribly uncomfortable situation, the sound of spikey heels interrupts them as Venus comes with a high glass containing some pink and fresh looking beverage. She lights up as she sees Rat and strokes his cheek as she passes him.

“Morning, sunshine. I have a fresh pot of that black gold waiting for you, Georgie. You’d like some French toast?”

“Mornin’, Ven. Thanks, I’d love that. Just gonna, uhm… grab a smoke.”

"Okey-dokey, darling.”
Rat disappears from the dorm and Juice finally manages to open the door to the room that used to be his, entering it with Venus in tow. He slumps down onto the bed again.

“I shouldn’t be here…”
“Should any of us?”
”Huh?”

Venus gives a sad little smile and sits down beside him, handing the smoothie over.

“Drink, love. You see, Juice, this place… It hasn’t been a happy one for a very long time, trust me.”

Juice shrugs before taking a small sip.

“It isn’t with me in it, that’s for sure. Almost had Rat killed.”
“Well, I almost had Jax, Bobby and Chibs killed by my dearest mother’s thugs, baby. And sweet Georgie most certainly wishes my Tiger dead a couple of times a week, at least.”
“Doesn’t quite compare, Venus. Last time I checked, bullying prospects into shape isn’t equal to treason.”

Venus just waves her hand, like she’s getting rid of an annoying fly.

“Oh, you angry boys and your treason… God only knows how ya’ll manage to hold your dicks while peeing, being so burdened with heavy thoughts. And speeking of angry boys, your Scot is outside, screaming at his estranged wife on phone. Again.”
“Fiona?”
“That would be her name, yes. And the girl should be here any moment now.”

Right. Kerrianne. Juice’s fear of his former brothers somehow managed to completely wipe out Chibs’ mention of her sudden visit. This is too much right now. The time that’s passed since he stepped outside the gates of Stockton prison, has been one long maze of numb isolation, sickness, soreness, loneliness and just too much emotions cramped into too little time. It’s been a rocky path of lonely motel rooms, hungry stray kittens, grocery deliveries and nightmares in the shape of green smileyes and dead nazis.

It’s been paved with hungry kisses, gut-wrenching confessions and inner turmoil kept at bay with the help of numbess and little white pills of wonder. The result of finally learning to bottle up and choke on the emotions instead of running wild, hurting people he never intended to hurt. And now Venus is serving him breakfast in the club house, while Chibs’s kid is coming for a visit, her dad yelling at her mom on the phone and somewhere there’s an Aryan shot caller wanting the previous shot caller’s prison bitch dead because said dead shot caller had the nerve to leave whatever nazi treasures he owned to him. A bitch who not only is still breathing above ground, but is also a half black, half Puerto Rican who sucks Scottish cock.

Juice has had enough. It’s gonna swallow him whole, chew him to shreds and spit him out. He feels sick again, pressing his hands onto his middle, bending forward as if to keep the insides still. Panic attacks don’t go well with breakfast. His clutching his belly, the breathing speeds up because the little white wonders aren’t working in full quite yet.

Days and nights of seemingly endless jumps, throws and hits, bouncing between different extremes, internal and external alike, with this little reveal of yet another unexpected thing added to this already cramped up mixture of elements to deal with, hits hard and merciless.
“Venus, I…”
“Right here, darling.”

She’s quick and Juice’s pathetic attempt for a breakfast ends up in the litter bin, along with at least some dosis of the meds that haven’t yet worked their wonder. Juice spits, paces and whimpers.

“Jesus Christ… Venus, I… I can’t… This… Oh, God… I have to go…”
“Go where, love? You’re gonna take that little kitten of yours in your hoodie and crawl your way out, hoping someone will go against a club vote, not to mention their pres’ personal wishes, and open the gates, leaving you to the wolves? Kerrianne is a sweet girl, I assure you.”
“I know, I’ve met her.”
“Then what’s the problem, baby?”
“Please, don’t call me that.”
“Sorry, I didn’t think. But Juice, listen to me: Chibs wont just throw his girl at you, expecting you to act all fine and dandy. He had no idea she was coming and is probably still pissed off.”

Juice shudders.

“Exactly. He doesn’t need more shit. I mean, not that Kerrianne… I didn’t mean it like…”
“I know, silly. Stay put.”

Venus raises to wet a towel and get some water. She wipes off Juice’s face and has him rinse and spit the vile taste in a small bowl of stainless steel. She’s working with soft but efficiant hands and half meaningless babble, as if taking care of a small child. Was it anyone else, another time and place, it would’ve felt humiliating, but right here and now, with her, it does the trick. Juice’s mind can’t seem to handle anything more strenuous thinking and doing as it is.

Apparently, not all of the meds have gone to waste and with the help of Venus’ soothing presence and babble along with a certain kitten bumping it’s tiny head onto Juice’s legs, as the minutes goes by, the panic attack slowly abates, one heartbeat at the time.
Chapter 84

It’s probably cheating. Outsourcing some of the less pleasant parts of parenting to your Sergeant at Arms, but Happy doesn’t mind doing what he does best. Samcro’s most silent and deadly brother looks perfectly normal – normal as in Happy normal, which should never be confused with anything close to normal normal – and by the look of his passenger, it wasn’t quite the cab ride she expected. Quinn’s presence was probably not much of a comfort, considering he rode behind them.

Chibs swallows. If there’s one occasion when it’s not considered undignified for a Son, not even the pres, to lose control of his softer emotions in front of others, this is it. Seeing your child again, grown up or not doesn’t matter, for the first time in months. It used to be years, Chibs silently reminds himself, and he’s still royally pissed but he’s also a father and as angry as he is, he’s also proud, happy and most of all relieved that the reckless lass made it to Teller-Morrow safely. Kerrianne definitely looks more grown-up, but with that grumpy, self-conscious and easily insulted teenage trace still very much alive.

She’s wearing baggy jeans and a thin jacket, hair still long and curly and it hurts to be reminded of just how much of her childhood and adolescence Chibs has missed out on. Years that are inevitably lost and gone and although a lot of the blame for that lays on Jimmy, it’s not as if Chibs and Fi couldn’t have made better choices before he ended up with a permanent smile and one-way ticket across the pond. Chibs has raised a number of twenty-something-year-old lads and had Kerrianne been his son, he probably would’ve had a couple of swift and hard slaps the first thing, but Chibs only hits grown women who hits him first. He’s a violent man when he needs to, but there are limits and laying a hand on his only daughter exceeds well beyond that limit.

It’s awkward, almost as it was when they met in Belfast when Abel had been kidnapped. Chibs walks up to her, not smiling, but the scowl isn’t as prominent as he intended to.

“Hi, Kerri.”
“Hi, da.”

The yard is not crowded, but Chibs has no intention letting his brothers witness this unexpected reunion and he knows it’s cruel, but instead of hugging her, he just takes her bag and points at the door.

“Inside.”

He’s more relieved, but also angrier than he expected and he walks with long, fast steps towards what used to be Jax’s room, that these days belongs to the current Samcro pres, and as soon as his reckless lass has entered, Chibs closes the door and drops the bags on the floor.

“What the hell were ye thinkin’, lass? Huh?! Are ye outta yer goddamn mind? Sit!”

His daughter quickly sits on the closest available surface, which is Chibs’ bed and if he’s completely honest, he’s using Kerrianne as an outlet for the worry and stress over Juice that he carries around. Yes, the lass made a reckless, stupid decision and Chibs is furious, barking at her about responsibility, unsafe roads, Interpol and fucking call first, but it’s also partly for show.

“What’ if I’d been outta Cali? Or outta the states? We have charters in Canada, Russia and… bloody Sweden, ye daft lass! Ye’re the one in the family, the only on two bloody sides, getting’ into uni an’
yet ye’re actin’ like an amadán! Ye have a death wish?”
“I had a fight with maw…”
“Oh, ye had a fight with yer maw, alright? Let me tel ye something, lass: my maw used to lock us inside the bedroom whenever my drunk old man chased after us with the metal-clad end of his belt, so don’ even try makin’ yerself look some kind o’ refugee.”
“Yeah? How do ye think living with maw and Jimmy was like?”

She’s talking quietly, tense and it’s about all it takes for Chibs to lose enough of his pissed off and worried old man’s posture. Kerrianne’s absence has been a permanent hole in his heart, one of those he’s never expected to heal and countless times he’s been certain he’ll never see her again, that his moment with the Reaper has come. He’s accepted that, it’s part of what you sign up for in a life like this. Part of the sacrifices you have to make, in order to keep the few innocent people connected to a criminal’s dangerous life a wee bit safer.

But he’s missed her. Mourned the loss quietly and never enough to lose his shit, but he’s a man of flesh and blood and the love he has for Kerrianne is the one of a father, absent not by his own choosing. Another man stole years of his fatherhood and Chibs knows all too well how deep down the slippery slope he’d have gotten, had he allowed himself to dwell in it. Kerrianne’s teenage like pout has disappeared and now she just looks lost and unhappy.

“I… ye promised ye’d let me come for Easter.”
“It’s bloody October!”
“Aye, an’ ye promised last bloody Easter!”

Now she’s the kid again, lower lip actually trembling a little and it’s his girl, his sweet, precious lass that calls him da, despite having been raised by another man.

“Christ, Kerrianne… C’mere, a leanbh*…”

And just like that, he has his little girl who’s not that little anymore, in his arms again. Chibs is stepping back and allows Filip, the father of a daughter he sometimes feels he barely knows, to hold his crying lass, while he’s crying himself in her hair. The anger avoken by the fear and suddenness melts away and leaves a small scar that will barely itch, but just remind Chibs of the limits a life free from the law sets.

They sit like that on the bedside for a while, not talking, at least Kerrianne isn’t, while Chibs mumbles little endearments between the sobs. He’s an emotional man who’s never seen tears as an inevitable sign of weakness. Those who choose this kind of life without shedding tears, are sociopats, or just empty, soulless creatures in the shape of man. Even Happy did it when they took farewell of Jax. It was the first time Chibs had seen the man cry. Now he makes an ugly sob.

“Ye’re takin’ after yer mother, lass…”

He can feel her smile against his neck.

“Funny… She said it was ye I took after…”
“Tha’ right?”
“Aye…”

Chibs can’t help but smiling too and he wipes his eyes quickly before scooting Kerrianne away a bit to have a proper look at her. She definitely has the look of her mother, but she’s got Chibs’ eyes and the slightly dark smile is entirely her own. She’s not Trinity Ashby, not by far and a part of Chibs is
endlessly grateful that Fi has managed to give their daughter enough of normality to allow her to be a child for far longer than they ever were. Kerrianne has no juvie records, no gang tats, no far too early arrived wee ones or an arsehole for a lad dictating her life.

Chibs is hardly a feminist or even a very modern man, but he’s not the kind of man who enjoys control over women. He’s always preferred the lasses around him, being it girlfriends, business associates, other club members’ old ladies and daughters, strong and independent. Being as tough as Gemma, Fiona and Maureen is rare, but the MC is still very much a man’s world and it requires some balls, especially if you’re a woman, to gain respect – not to mention power. And from Chibs’ experience, a cornered woman longing for some space, is ten times more dangerous than a man who already knows what the cut allows him.

With Jax, Opie and later Half-Sack and Rat – not to mention Juice – there was a quiet but very clear change coming to life. Tara and Donna, unlike Gemma or Maureen, never viewed themselves as married to the club, but to their men alone and never would’ve accepted being smacked around as a normal part of being married to bikers. Juice, being the lap dog he was back when things were good, much to especially Clay’s and Gemma’s surprise, was quite popular with the chicks. He never seemed to have a need for acting tough or being rough with them to get what he needed. Gemma called it shyness, teased the lad for being awkward, but it wasn’t that Juice didn’t know how to charm a woman. He just didn’t want or needed to do it like Jax, Clay or John.

The very idea of anyone, no matter the patch or lifestyle, smacking Kerrianne around or treating her as a two-legged possession, is enough for a soft-hearted Filip to have very bloody Chibs thoughts and he lifts his daughter’s chin, looking properly at her face.

“Ye had a nice ride wi’ Happy an’ Quinn?”
“Happy is… scary as hell, da.”
“I know.”

His grin is a little nasty, scars or no scars, but he needs her to understand that she can’t just come storming in and expecting things to be at her fancy. The slightly shameful grimaze she makes, assures Chibs his reckless lass has gotten the point and he gives her yet another kiss on her forehead, before patting her shoulder.

“How… yer da would love nothing more than just chatter the day away with his girl, but since she decided to not check with his schedule before heading over here, he’s got some things to tend to.”
“Of course, da. Uhm… I’d really just want to… have a shower and get something to eat. An’ rest.”
“Sounds like the first good idea ye’ve had in a while, a leanbh*… I’ll let our lil’ house elf Chucky prepare ye something an’ I hope ye’re not allergic to dogs or cats.”
“No… Not a cat’s person, though.”

Chibs snorts.

“Ye better be very nice to this one, or Juice might get violent.”
“Juice?”

Chibs sits down on the bed, slowly pulling his daughter close in another hug, sighing.

“He’s not a member anymore, but I guess I’ve told ye tha’ on some occasion.”
“Aye. Didn’t think ye allowed ex-members in the club house.”
“This is… a complicated situation, Kerr. Better if ye know as little as possible. Unless Juice tells ye something himself. Just keep in mind he’s… not as used to be. He’s been through some really awful
shite an’ there’s a reason we have a partial lockdown. Cannae have ye strolling around Charming, lovey.”
“Ye want me to keep him company?”
“Ye could give it a try, I guess.”

Chibs scratches his hair. In theory, it’s a good idea. Kerri and Juice got along really well back in Belfast, but that’s a lifetime ago. At least it feels like it. A memory so distant it’s like an object collecting dust in a museum. Or getting roughly moved around, destroying whatever order Juice’s chaotic mind desperately tries to maintain.

“Ye really managed to choose the wrong time for a visit, lass.”
“It’s never the right time.”

She sounds so grown up, suddenly, and Chibs feels a hundred years old.
Chapter 85

Chapter Summary

Again, one of two chapters with different pov's again, this time Ratboy. Takes place shortly after him seeing Juice again, and Ratboy has stayed outside with his coffee and thoughts.

He’s not squeamish, definitely not. Neither is he one to feel sorry for people ending up i deep shit thanks to themselves. Unintentional or not. Juice is a rat, at least he was, regardless of the last years silence. He had it coming, but the anger Rat feels right now, is less directed towards the former brother than it probably should.

The last time he saw Juice, the man was handed his cut by Jax and Chibs turned away, from what Rat assume was disgust. He should’ve known better. The then VP never showed his back as a sign of hate or disgust. He still doesn’t. It’s just not what Chibs does and his actions now, trying to save and care for a man he’s all but refused to mention for three years, so easily would’ve been considered treason or weakness or some sort of personal agenda, but it’s not. The man came clear about who he’d been visited, instead of trying to deal with it alone and that’s why Rat’s respect for him is as high as ever. Chibs loved Jax, sure, but not as much as Rat did and the love the pres had for Juice speaks loud and clear.

After all, they let Jax face Mr. Mayhem entirely on his own terms. That’s a farcry from being sent inside under false promises of coming back, only to be raped and stabbed by a nazi, with the pres' blessings. The rapes may not have been openly confirmed or even admitted to the club, but Rat isn’t stupid and if, if Juice suffered through that shit believing it was a club vote… Rat might still want him dead or at least forbidden to come near the club again, but not without letting him know it wasn’t sanctioned and never would’ve been.

Rat sips on his coffee, finishing his third smoke this morning, which is two more than he usually has before breakfast. Venus’ French toast is delicious, but he has no appetite now and only nibbles at it. Somehow, seeing Juice up and walking made him look worse than cooped up in bed. Just skin and bones and those eyes… Large, dark, exhausted eyes that didn’t yield. He looked so ashamed, but where the man who betrayed them would’ve tried to protect himself, this one didn’t hide it. It was all there, the shame and guilt, the acceptance of what had happened, of the responsibility and whatever consequences it had. No excuses, no hiding, no covering up. Nothing.

Juice doesn’t look like he faced Mr. Mayhem and got away. He looks like he’s prospecting for the position himself. Rat isn’t one to forgive and forget easily and the love he has for Jax is still very much alive. Accepting that he sent Juice inside under terms hided from the rest of the club and that the rat chose to protect them despite the false promises and the pres sanctioned rapes… It’s not right and it’s one thing taking a bullet for the club, or even bite your own tongue off as a payment for it, but no matter how much Rat loves his former pres and hates, or at least despises Juice, the price he paid for unintentionally escaping Mr. Mayhem, is one that only Otto’s suffering inside comes close to.

No, Rat isn’t squeamish. If he was, he’d been carrying the wrong fucking patch. Neither is he ready to forgive trespasses he still has no real evidence of if the circumstances really has changed. Chibs’
trust in the rat and of course the reports from Gaines and rumours about Stockton prison’s most silent Son since Otto are the main reasons why Rat accepts anything but a bullet in Juice’s head, but there’s more to it than pure facts and respect for the pres. Seeing his former brother in this state was nothing but a shock.

The picnic tables are slowly filling with more brothers and a couple of girlfriends as well. Brooke is at home, probably still asleep before her classes this afternoon. Rat would never admit it, but he’s grateful she doesn’t want kids. Gemma would’ve been onto them about that, probably even trying to convince Brooke which would only end badly. Most of the guys here, at least the fully patched, have kids, except Happy – which is probably for the best – and T.O. who wants, but can’t. And MC members aren’t exactly adoptive parents material. He and his old lady Mary have tried for years, as Rat found out on a drunken night when T.O. was very deep down his bottle and spilled his heart out about the failed IVF attempts and Rat hasn’t said a word about it to anyone.

He thought, considering how much T.O. wanted kids, that he’d be the first to get offended by Brooke getting her tubes tied but much to his surprise, T.O. just said it was their choice and no one had the right to say shit about it. And unless Brooke had planned on lending out her uterus to him and Mary, it wasn’t as if they got any less children if she had some she didn’t want.

That’s also new, Rat muses as his phone vibrates from Brooke’s usual on-my-way-to-classes-love-you text and he sees Chibs’ daughter coming out from the clubhouse with one of Venus’ legendary breakfast smoothies in her hand. He doesn’t really know Kerrianne. She’s not been here often or long enough for them to get to know each other and she’s always come off as more than a little shy. Venus fusses with her, as she does with everyone when she’s got the chance. She’s probably already waiting on Juice as well and Rat is surprised that it doesn’t bother him. Venus is part of the club, yes, but entirely on her own terms and she’s also managed to make Tig a slightly more pleasant person to be around and Rat wont piss on that accomplishment.

Understanding Chibs’ mind in all this, is not as easy. There’s something off about his reconnection with Juice. This level of personal concern isn’t like him, not even for the sake of finding out the truth about a fishy club vote that may or may not have had reasons and consequences that weren’t brought to the table. Regardless of Chibs’ true intentions, there’s no way Samcro’s letting fucking white hicks rule their club. Rat will stand by his pres in this, not because he cares for Juice, but because it’s the right thing to do for Samcro. And maybe because he’s not a fucking psychopath.
Chapter 86

Chapter Summary

The second of two chapters with different pov's again, this time Kerrianne. Takes place shortly after her arrival at the clubhouse, the same morning.

Trinity was always a part of it. The cause, the fight, the club. She was older and a “different type of girl”, maw used say when Kerrianne asked. It was hard not to take it as criticism. Honestly, Kerrianne has never really been prone to rebellion. Fiona isn’t the kind of maw who even needs to threaten with the rod, because she just went straight to the serious stuff. If ye don’t listen to yer maw, lass, I could end up in jail for the rest o’ ma life an’ ye’d be handed over to the gardai, puttin’ ye in one o’them foster homes for IRA kids.

She’d even shown prison pictures of da and news of how many years other True IRA members were sentenced to. Scared her, really, and Kerrianne had had nightmares about it for some time, but maw never punished or scared her without consolation. Talking about da when there were others than just the two of them around, was a really bad idea. Not as in some of Kerrianne’s classmates in primary school who had divorced parents and knew it would be a fight if they talked too much about one parent in front of the other, but really, really bad. As in dangerous as hell bad. Newspaper articles bad. Kerrianne might not be Trinity Ashby, but she knows her da has cheated death a lot. She has no illusions of him leaving a peaceful life, but things have changed and since Jax Teller died, there’s not been any bad news from Samcro.

Once, Jimmy O’Phelan took her da away and then, Chibs Telford wiped her stepda off the Earth. It’s no more than fair for Kerrianne to grasp whatever she can have now. Phonecalls, Skype, letters and vague promises aren’t enough anymore. Trinity hasn’t been left outside like Kerrianne, so there’s really noone to share this with. It’s not as if the chemistry student known as Kathleen Ó Flannagáin can bond with people on campus either. Hi, I’m Kerrianne, nice to meet ye. Oh, by the way, Interpol’s searching for my IRA terrorist maw and my da is an MC leader in Cali, who stabbed my stepda an’ gave him a Glasgow smile, like the kind he was given himself before he was kicked out o’ IRA an’ banished from Ireland an’ ended up in another bloody war zone in a wee town called Charming. Which classes are ye taking?

She’s always had one foot inside and the other one in some kind of no man’s land. Never the usual world, not once. She’s gone through most of her school years with private tutors, devoted to the cause and with enough knowledge of maths and biology and languages to give a decent education, but Kerrianne has no class photos, no memory of school activities, desk mates, or making her packed lunch. And no siblings. For some reason, Father Kellan never preached about that. The importance of the marital sacrament. Maw and da never got divorced but it didn’t seem to matter, Jimmy being with her despite that. Being an outlaw, or the daughter of two, is as much about knowing which rules the adults will break without question, and which ones you will pay for with your life. In Kerrianne’s experience, it’s more about who’s in charge and what he or she wants, that sets the rules, no matter of what the Bible or catechism say about it.

Da isn’t happy. Kerrianne can tell because his voice changes. She remembers he used to sound like that the time before he left Belfast. How he seemed absent in long moments, frowning to himself and
lost in his own thoughts. They weren’t pleasant ones, and when maw and da had tucked Kerrianne in for the night and thought she was asleep, she would hear their low, tense mumble through the door. The name Jimmy came up a lot and maw would sound frustrated and da angry. They argued a lot, but always told her not to worry. That they loved each other, loved her and that sometimes grownups are mad at each other, but it’ll pass.

It didn’t. It just got worse. And now, Kerrianne can see those signs of worry in her da’s voice and on his scarred face again. She fairly sure they have less to do with her sudden visit, than they have with Juice. She’s also sure it’s a bit childish of her to feel a sting of jealousy, that her da is closer to literally all of her club members than to her. She doesn’t belong here any more than she belongs with Sambel, IRA or the campus at uni.

She’s had her shower and changed clothes. Her da’s room is pretty large. It’s Jax’s old room, apparently, but shows no signs of him. The walls are empty, undecorated, save for a couple of framed pictures of herself, maw and da, Ireland, Sambel and then her grandparents back in Glasgow she’s never met. Otherwise, the room is weirdly tidy in a way one wouldn’t expect of SOA, but maw told her that despite the short amount of time da spent in the army, he’s been molded somewhat from it.

That means things in here are for practical purposes, more than decoration or comfort. A made bed, clothes tucked away in lockers and drawers, whatever gadgets kept to a minimum: lighters, cigarette packages, cellphone chargers, a bottle of scotch and some weapons, mostly knives. Kerrianne makes a grimaze and stops snooping where there’s nothing to be seen anyway. She takes to brush her hair, but then decides it’s okay as it is. No one here to impress after all, she’s hungry and if she’s not wrong, there’s a smell of coffee and French toast coming from the kitchen. Kerrianne hangs the towel to dry and when she’s pretty sure her minimalistic and probably still quite pissed da wont stumble on any of her things, she opens the door and pads out in the direction of the breakfast smell.
Chapter 87

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s the scent that gives him away. Carbolic soap, cheap tobacco, musk and leather… The impossible softness of the rough hands.

“Chibs…?”
“Hey, lil’ one…”

Juice almost smiles and opens his eyes. The endearment is so oddly sweet, not hidden in Gaelic and it feels better just realising that it’s Chibs right away. No nightmares, confused thoughts or other mists clouding up his sense of reality. The Scot’s callous fingers are pulling through Juice’s hair, scratching his scalp just a little. Juice sighs.

“Didn’t mean to… ‘S just… the room, and Ratboy…”
“He said something to ye?”
“Only that I look like shit which aint wrong.”
“Ye’ll look better in time, lad. Try’an not thinking about it. An’ with a face like his, he’s not really one to talk, aight? Thank God his lass was sensible enough havin’ her tubes tide, before spreadin’ his genes.”
“You’re a nasty old man sometimes, Chibbie. Anyone told you that?”
“Oh, aye. Lots o’times, lil’ one. Cannae for my life figure out wha’ ye’re seeing in an old, fat bastard like me… Have no idea how to help ye… for real…”

It sounds sad, confused, as if Chibs has caught himself finally thinking something he’s only done subconsciously. It’s not a fishing for compliments or reassurance either. The big, brown eyes look so lost and Juice automatically leans closer to the bedside and the kneeling man, nuzzling the hands.

“You’re doing more for me than I’d ever been able to fucking dream about.”

It’s true. It’s also true that Chibs has hurt him badly, refused to listen to him, turned his back on him and reacted to his suicide attempt like it was a personal offense rather than a cry for a way out. But he’s holding him now, not shoving him away in any sense.

“Spoke to the priest.”
“Padre Mark?”
“Aye. He’s fine. Jus’ worried ’bout ye.”
“Can I talk to him? I mean… just to… could use a burner…”
“He’s coming over. Later tonight. Hap will pick’im up. Ye alright with tha’?”
“Yeah… Thanks.”

Juice hasn’t been thinking a lot of the priest, or anything outside his demons and the mentioning of padre Mark brings the rest of the fucked up reality to the surface. The grocery delivery job, the parole violations, the trashed room. Fucking nazis coming after the padre because Tully… Juice’s stomach is knotting up again and it hurts, stings like fucking acid. He presses a hand onto it, trying to breathe slow. Chibs strokes his hand with his finger.

“Hate to ask but… when was the last time ye actually took a shite?”
“Not since the hospital.”
“Jesus, lad…”
"Haven’t exactly been eating a lot, man.”
"Should’ve dropped by Clear Passages.”
"It’s still there?"
"Aye. Ye should know, ye own… what was it…?"
"Twenty percent. Thought I’d been bought out…"

Chibs just shakes his head.

"Ye really need to go through yer finances, lad."
“I wasn’t planning on being around, as you might remember… Fuck, this stings!"

The idea of getting a colonic has never been less appealing. Juice just feels generally bodily miserable. The things that don’t hurt, feel numb or weak or both. It’s the body of a man who wasn’t supposed to be alive and therefore hasn’t been taking care of it. You don’t waste fresh fruits, exercise, stress management techniques or green tea and mint colonics on a walking corpse in prison uniform.

Chibs now moves to lay his hand onto Juice’s stomach. The pressure is light, almost non-existant, and the fingers traces very carefully over what used to be lean, prominent muscles but now is a bony torso, only the contours of former strenght left. Juice swallows and Chibs’ eyes suddenly turn hard.

“Don’ go there, Juice.”
“What?”
“Ye’re not… nasty, got tha’?”
“I didn’t…”
"Ye did."

It’s the voice Chibs uses when he’s about to give a whole lecture and it’s almost comical, how much he sounds like the man who used to make sarcastic but fond remarks of Juice’s stupid head tats, lack of smartness and jitteriness around girls during the prospect year. It took a while before the harsh Scot saw anything more in him than an awkward kid left on the Samcro doorstep. Now he looks firmly at him, stern as ever.

“I know things are beyond fucked up right now, kid. Not sayin’ I know how ye’re feeling, but I can only imagine… Haven’t been this peched* myself since bloody Belfast an’ all I want is to get seriously drunk an’ high somewhere quiet an’ sleep for a week or two.”
“Sorry…”
“Not yer fault, so stop bloody apologising or I’ll have to punch yer lights out.”
“A coma actually sounds pretty nice…”

Now he smiles. Cracks up, really. A big, toothy grin because if he doesn’t laugh, he’d cry and he’s sick of that. Then a cramp breaks it and he gasps, curls up tight again but the laugh comes out anyway, along with tears.

“How… the fuck… am I even alive, Chibs?”
“Cause ye’re strong. Ye’re a feisty lil’ shite, laddie.”

Juice snorts, wiping the tears away as quickly as they came.

“Couldn’t even pull the trigger, man…”

*peched: Amazing, astounded, or delighted.
Chibs’ looks pained, the years suddenly heavy on him again.

“I’ll never forgive myself for telling ye that.”

“I have.”

“I’m not as forgiving as ye, Juicyboy. An’ if we’re about to compare fucking carcasses, ye could do way better than a fat, old Scot fightin’ gravity. T’is not right…”

“What isn’t?”

“Ye’re not well, not by any standards, an’ the last ye need is a confused old bastard like me, tryin’ to figure out why the hell he’s been fine without tits an’ pussy for weeks now. I love ye, Juicy, an’ I wont turn my back on ye, ever again, but we gotta focus on getting’ ye back together. Ye understan’ wha’ I’m sayin’?”

“Yeah. No gay shit.”

It’s probably for the best, Juice honestly doesn’t even know what it all means to him. He definitely doesn’t know how Chibs feels about it.

“I don’… regret it, Juice.”

“Me neither. But it’s…”

“Not exactly a good time.”

“No kidding…”

Now they both smile and it’s like something’s getting lighter between them. Like there’s been an invisible, unspoken tension none of them dared to give voice to, out of fear. Fear of rejection, of humiliation, of misunderstanding maybe, because so many things have broke and been trampled to dust on their long, violent and lonely road together. The fear of once again loosing something they thought they’d already lost and therefore weren’t prepared to feel again.

Juice swallows and it hurts, but he forces a smile he knows doesn’t look happy, but at least it’s honest.

“You’re still gonna kiss my hair, right? I mean, you did when I was in the club and…”

Chibs just groans and pulls him close, nuzzling his hair and Juice feels the way he’s shivering.

“Juicyboy… My lil’ one… Bloody muppet…”

The touch isn’t healing, his insides still screams at him, but the world seems just a little less chaotic.

“I’ll do all I can to get ye back on yer feet, kiddo. Gonnae help ye… the club’s gonnae help ye an’ we’re gonnae walk ye through it together, aight?”

As if there’s an actual chance of putting the world back, not to how it used to be, but to something more steadfast, something that might even feel like living. Healing this state of neither living nor dead, not in full, but perhaps enough to find what scraps are left of Juice Ortiz, with or without the Reaper on his back.

It might be the meds. Might be the promises. Might even be the room. Juice doesn’t know. All he’s sure of, is that Chibs’ words are healing. His voice, his touches, his worried eyes. Without him, the rest won’t matter. Juice already tried to keep a body alive, while choking and burying his heart, mind and soul. That numbness is the single most painful state he’s ever been in and since Chibs started to breathe life into him again, Juice knows there’s no going back to that self-punishing state of darkness. He’ll either heal enough to have some kind of life worth living again, or he’ll meet Mr.
Mayhem for real, in one way or another.

The life of a Son offers no middleground, no matter if the cut is gone and the ink erased. The Reaper will never leave your side. In the end, He’ll get what He wants and in that moment, it doesn’t matter how your skin is marked or what covered it as you took your last breath. Sons Of Anarchy is a club only a very few will ever be able to patch in – and even fewer will walk the thin line all the way to the end without stumbling too much.

Thinking of it, it’s pretty fucked up how a club that exclusive chose the mark of the one thing that greets every man and woman on Earth with open arms, without judge or discrimination. Color, money, sex, cut, treason or loyalty… The Reaper will harvest them all, sweep His cloke around heros and cowards, brothers and traitors, men and women alike. For someone outside this life of Mayhem, it’s a morbid and depressing mark at best, but for Juice it’s the sign of belonging, of certainty in a world that otherwise is so very unstable. He’s never feared death, he just can’t stand the thought of facing it all alone. The Reaper may lead the way, but He wont take your hand, wont wait for you to catch your breath, wont help you up when you stumble.

He wont hold you close in your last moment, wont offer words of comfort. His face is blind, His scythe swings across all things living regardless of their wishes when He thinks your time has come. Sometimes unfair, even merciless, but always certain. Never turning you away in disgust, no matter how you fell into His arms. When He marks you, it’s forever and nothing can make Him take His hand off you.

The Sons should’ve picked another symbol for their detachment from and despise of the normal way of life. In the end, death unites us all.

Chapter End Notes

*tired in Scottish slang
Chapter 88

He thought he’d have to remind himself of the age gap. The slightly creepiness of feeling whatever the fuck it is he feels for a man that looks as young as his daughter. Instead he just sees an old man trapped inside an abused body that used to belong to someone passing for a young lad. Broken, beaten, worn down inside out. A living reminder of how many pounds of flesh you can carve off a man’s bone before he stops walking.

It’s brutal. It’s beautiful. It’s the embodiment of mayhem. The one that doesn’t show in the bright red, then darkening color of fresh blood drying to black. The one that comes from the inside, the slow death, piece by piece, but not so silent you’re spared from seeing it. You’ll notice every step of it, until the walk finally starts grinding you down enough for the fear to become normal. The rumors of Juice’s health state must’ve reached every member as well as the prospects by now. Chibs knows how humans work. The severity of inner wounds very rarely becomes clear unless they’re matched by external damage. It’s when seeing Kerrianne, that Ratboy’s reaction to Juice finally hits home for Chibs.

Juice is severely damaged, body and mind. He needs proper medical treatment and supervision. He needs rest, lots and lots of rest, nutrition, care and a sense of stability and safety. The way the lad’s head starts spinning and running off with him when he feels out of control, is dangerous in more than one way. Above all, he needs friends, kindness and love. The kind that doesn’t require anything in return he can’t give. And he can’t be burdened with Chibs’ own feelings, or anything else outside recovery. What Chibs needs is atonement.

Chibs grits his teeth. Kerrianne might actually be of help here, if she’s able to understand the severity in the situation. There’s nothing romantic or free in running off to an MC club just because you’re having some shite in your life, even if your old man happens to run it. If Kerrianne thinks she’ll just sit and mope, scrolling her Facebook feed with her feet up around here, she’s very wrong. The prospects, Ricky and Pete, will show her around the garage and teach her a thing or two about engines and wheels. Chucky could use some help carrying grocery bags and Venus will be grateful for another potato peeler. Once Juice is fit for it, he’ll definitely need some company.

Right now, the lad’s asleep again, thank God. This has been one hell of a morning and Chibs hasn’t even been eating yet. Just coffee and that won’t do anymore. He’s too old and fat to run on empty in the morning, only to go crazy on grease later on. They also need to have a church meeting, make sure the priest arrives safely, get hold on a reliable doc who can run Juice a proper examination, at least bodily. A mental check-up isn’t as easy and in Chibs’ experience, it’s harder to find a psychiatrist that’s even able to make an evaluation of an underground patient. What he has to do, though, is calling Jarry. The last thing anyone needs right now, is an impromptu house search just because Charming cops or Juice’s shitty ass lawyer feel overlooked.

Apart from that, it’s just business as usual. Chibs curses silently. Grabbing an pen and paper comes next, writing down a note he hopes will make shite easier once Juice is awake. He still sleeps heavily and a small sound from the cat is the only thing breaking the silence in there. Chibs kneels by the bed, placing the note on the small bedside table.

The man who’s curled up like a child under the blanket has no idea what he’s stirring up inside Chibs’ old, stubborn heart. People who find unexpected love, are so often pictured as happy albeit confused, but Chibs just feels like he’s about to burst in his seams from something that’s silently been growing too big to ignore. It’s uncomfortable, scary and squeezes everything else into too small a
space. Nothing and noone has ever made Chibs feel like this, threatening to blow all dignity and logic to dust. There’s simply no box where it fits, no label that can bring order to this personal mayhem. He only knows what his heart and mind can agree on together.

That there were feelings long, long before things turned to shite, feelings he tucked away, buried so deep he could hardly find them himself. That those feelings all bore the sign of a shit eating grin, big, brown eyes and a heart on the sleeve. There’s not even ten years between them and still, Chibs can’t help but call him, think of him as boy, lad, kid.

A man you call any of those words, would be wrong to feel anything else for. Those words don’t hold the same meaning to Chibs as lass or girl. The female equivalents seem to have little to do with age. He’s never called Fi his woman or old lady. She’s his girl, his lass. But Juice… he was… not like a son to him, absolutely not, but Chibs always cared a bit more – or just different – about him than the others. A lost puppy with too innocent eyes, too much eagerness to please, but also surprisingly sharp teeth. More reckless than one would ever assume, when pushed to his limits. It’s never good to not know who you are without others. Juice is a pack animal if ever there was one, but at the same time perpetually uncertain of his place. Never completely trusting the love given, although never stop searching for it. Like a touched starved yet suspicious cat. And Chibs loves him to bits. Not the way he loves Kerrianne, or Jax, or Tig.

There’s passion underneath the brotherly feelings, deep down the reason, the chosen family. It touches the edges of what he once felt for Fi, when they were still young muppets and his face bore no scars. It makes his body vigilant, his blood rush and mind forget about what he thought he wanted. It’s straight, flat and taut where there used to be soft curves and huge tits. There’s a goddamn dick instead of a wet pussy… Jesus Christ.

Chibs bites back a moan, feeling his face getting a shade too warm. He knows Juice would understand if Chibs got himself laid. Probably even encourage it. Chibs hasn’t had sex in weeks and frankly, that’s scarier than most of this mess because it’s one thing to get curious at dick and a whole other to forego pussy without really missing it.

He gets up, grabs the things needed and heads out as silently as possible, padding away to one of the showers. The early hour means it’s not occupied and Chibs quickly gets inside, locks the door and gets his quite dirty clothes off. As soon as the hot water starts soaking his body, the dirty thoughts are streaming down along with it.

Chibs is tired. Not so much physically, but his head, his aging body, his fucking heart are wound up tight and need rest. Rest and release. He soaps up and grabs his now painfully hard cock, that won’t accept being ignored much longer. He’s used to have huge tits, wet, shaved pussy and firm, rounded asses invading his thoughts, that’s how it’s been since bloody forever, but as he tries to pull them before his closed eyes, they become bleak and formless, too vague to cause any movements inside him and Chibs hasn’t got the strength to stop the images taken their place.

In his mind, he’s splayed out on the bed, but there is no girl, but a man straddling him. The ass slowly sinking down, taking him one inch at the time, isn’t curvy, just firm and muscled. The thighs squeezing around him are hairy, muscular and there are breathy moans coming from the rider as he sinks all the way down.

Juice is so tight around him, slick and hot, and his cock… Chibs strokes himself a little faster, trying to hurry away from that particular thing because he’s never liked dick, not ever, it’s just… making him harder right now. The image of Juice riding him, breathy and happy and fucking needy, not scared or haunted by nightmares or pain, is so damn wrong, but Chibs has given up the idea of
getting tits and pussy into it by now. His brain just wont allow it, there’s only room for this man and the memory of how his body used to look. The firm muscles, slender hips and bouncy little ass. That sunny, slightly teasing smile Chibs has no problem imagining turning all dirty and almost dominant. How Juicy maybe, probably, was with girls and how he’d make them fall for it, easily as breathing.

That’s the man Chibs’ hand has turned into now. He can’t even slap away the inner picture of Juice’s own cock jumping and rubbing against him with the moves. Juice is moaning, the tip of his cock glistening from precum and he’s getting wetter by the second, from every hit from Chibs’ own cock against his prostrate.

In Chibs’ mind, Juice is coming closer and closer, his eyes closed and mind far away from any traumas or fears. He’s only riding a wave of pleasure and squeezing his muscles around Chibs’ cock, caressing the shaft like a vice of flesh and comes, sticky and shameless over Chibs’ chest. That’s when Chibs grabs those hips and slams himself up hard inside that slick, willing hole, pumping it until he’s too sensitive and Juice is a hot, mewling mess on top of him.

The image fades slower than expected and when Chibs is fully back in the lonely shower, his mind is momentarily silent about age gaps, absent pussy and one cock too many. There’s no reason, no tangled emotions either, just some form of, not acceptance but at least less surprise. A little less confusion. He doesn’t feel strange, filthy or even that exhausted about it. There’s just the familiar relaxation he’s not had in quite a while and it somehow feels like he’s back to his old self again. Which, if he allows himself to dwell, will fuck him up.

Chibs doesn’t allow himself that. He washes his hair quickly, leaves the shower and dries himself off roughly. He’s got a job to do and a cut to fill out, after all. The Reaper always has work to be done.
Chapter 89

Chapter Summary

TW: check the tags and make sure you're alright with ALL of them.

The world is quiet. Juice turns in his sleep, not writhering or thrashing. Just a normal movement during a normal sleep. The exhaustion came back with a bang, once the shock of the environment passed and now Juice is laying in a firm, yet soft and warm bed, sheets smelling of lavender from fabric softening and the air is fresh, the tree blind by the window moving a little in the breeze.

He’s alone in bed, but his rest is deep and calm. No dreams, neither good nor bad, are reaching him, there’s just the glorious, colorless rest where the world and his own mind are both shut off, silent and on a safe distance. It’s the manna from heaven for a man starved of any real rest. Being able to sleep on his own, but subconsciously knowing he’s not been left. The sleep of a man who’s nightmares, for once, aren’t playing tricks of loneliness with him.

In this moment, this peaceful rest, Juice doesn’t remember the chaos of the living, or the dead. There are no images of Jax, Tara or Miles stuck under his eyelids. He’s not hearing Henderson’s gutwrenching whistles, Chibs’ resentment or Gemma’s lies. He’s not seeing Clay’s last look on him, the closest to one of a fathers Juice has ever had. There are no hands moving over him, not Tully’s, not the chinks’, not Henderson’s… Juice isn’t being torn apart again and again, not being held and comforted by a rapist refusing to kill him. There are no prison alarms waking him up from an uneasy sleep, deprived on any real rest.

Juice opens his eyes. It’s late, probably past lunch time, as if time meant shit for a dead man suddenly dragged out of his tomb. It’s such a strange feeling, merely existing in a place where he used to live. By the wall, Chibs is sitting, sleeping like only an ex military can. Tig is just like him, as was Half-Sack. They could fall asleep seemingly anywhere, like pushing a button. Chibs is not quite as easily thrown into sleep, but he’s good at it when he must. Sleeping in uncomfortable positions.

There is a stack of papers next to him, a calculator and a pen. His reading glasses have slipped down onto his chest and a well-known ball of fur has curled up next to him, eyes half open. Juice smiles.

“You’re cheating on me? Traitor…”

The whispered endearment makes him go silent again, smile vanishing, even if the cat doesn’t have a clue of what the word means. Juice’s stomach suddenly makes a move, like a bite in his guts and the world becomes worrying, fearful and chaotic again.

This is why he’s not good on his own, Juice thinks as he tries to breathe against the pain. He just sucks at sorting things on the inside, feelings and thoughts, ideas and impulses. They all mix up in one messy cocktail that threatens to choke him or make him puke. The only thing that’s ever kept that chaos at bay, was Samcro. Well, for the first years, at least. He had a place, a home, a family. He belonged somewhere, was someone and had people caring about him. The thing with him, is that as long as he’s with a pack he trusts and loves, Juice is no coward. He’s never refused to pull his weight, never tried to use the club for any personal gain. That’s what he knows, after all this horribly
lonesome time, that the only thing he ever really feared, was to be kicked out for reasons beyond his power to change. His heritance, the color of his old man’s skin.

The threat of loneliness, of not belonging anywhere or to anyone, is the one thing that can make Juice do something as reckless and stupid as ratting on the very people he wants to protect. When there is no other voice but his own, it becomes so loud, turning him deaf towards voices of reason. Had he just trusted Chibs from the very beginning, telling him about his old man as soon as Lincoln and Roosevelt started their shit, knowing in his heart what he should’ve known all along, that Chibs was his friend and would’ve tried to find a fucking way…

Instead he ratted to a cop, stole from the club, shot Miles and blamed it on the prospects. He suffocated Darvany on Jax’s orders, covered up Tara’s murder because Gemma was not just Jax’s mother, but the whole club’s and, just like Clay, a stand-in parent where Juice’s own mother was missing. Although, Gemma was nothing like Emilia Ortiz. It’s an irrational thought, but Juice can’t help but picturing Gemma surviving raging cancer out of fucking offense. Kicking the living shit out of the illness and chemo side effects alike. Emilia just crumbled, although the lack of a good medical health insurance definitely contributed.

At least Juice had been with her when she died, on leave from juvie for special circumstances. Bianca was too young to witness that, although their aunt Juanita had made sure she saw her mother once she’d been cleaned up and dressed before taken to the morgue. Brian, being the worthless piece of shit he alwas was, had tried to forbid Juice from coming to the funeral. For once, aunt Juanita had done something right and told the bastard to shut his mouth unless he wanted to loose the rest of his teeth of which he hadn’t too many as it was.

Juice had been allowed to the funeral, but he can’t remember crying. He’d been off to juvie for six months after some time on the street and felt like an alien among relatives he’d not seen for years. They remembered a quiet but sweet little toddler with dimples and cheap sandals. The kid attending the funeral in a borrowed suit, had scars and nicks on his face and neck, prominent cheekbones and the first of several tattoos hidden under his shirt. He’d not actually lived with any of his family for a long time and Brian had done a pretty good job, making sure Bianca wouldn’t expect her older brother back. The nine-year-old crying when Juice got kicked out, was eleven and didn’t want to look at him. She’d just waved a little and then turned away. That’s when Juice finally learned how little blood and names can matter to where you belong.

A sting in his guts interrupts the loop of thoughts and Juice is almost grateful for it. As he slowly pulls his knees to his chest again, he sees a piece of paper with Chibs’ familiar scrawl.

*When you’re up, wake me up too/C*

Juice sighs. The man looks like he could really need some more sleep, but on the other hand, Juice doesn’t want to be awake alone in here. Or going outside. He rubs his stomach for a while, willing it to take it a little easier with him, before raising. He’s not as unsteady as he feared, meaning he probably had less of the sedatives than the night he was brought here, which is good. He approaches the sleeping form on the floor, joints cracking like on an old man, as he sinks down.

“Hey, Chibbie…”

It takes a while, the Samcro pres is grunting in his sleep and looks like he’s ready to throw a punch when he finally opens a pepper dark eye to the half, glaring like only he can, before seeing who it is.

“Got any sleep, lad?”
“Yeah. No nightmares, at least.”
“Good.”
“How about you?”

Chibs smiles.

“I can sleep through a bloody civil war, kiddo.”

The rough hand reaches out, just lightly touching Juice’s cheek. It lasts but a second and then Chibs pulls away like he was suddenly reminded of what they talked about before Juice went to sleep. The withdrawal shouldn’t hurt, they both know, both agreed on it’s the best thing for now, but logic doesn’t help now and the touch, small and shortlived as it is, leaves an invisible hole in Juice’s skin. It stirs up an old thought that used to torment him when he was on the run from the club.

*What if no one will ever touch me again?*

The time between Tully’s death and the reunion with Chibs, lacked any wanted touches. With Tully, at least there had been a few of them, fucked up situation as it was. But after his death, there were none. Absolutely none.

For the almost two years without Tully, there was no comfort, no warmth, not even a mockery image of closeness. There was just so called protected custody, repeated rapes and cops and a district prosecutor alternating between promises and threats while the piece of shit lawyar mostly seemed to be on anyone but Juice’s side.

He’d already wavered more than once, of course they’d count on him to do it again. Alone, without protection and no family, by blood or by choise, who gave a damn. Sometimes, during the hearings leading absolutely nowhere, Juice managed to detach himself so well from the room and the cops, he could slip back into his own mind and let the most ridiculous thoughts run wild.

*What shoe size does that piece of shit have? Is his wife buying them for him? Or does he have a husband? No… he’s not the type. His wife’s name’s probably… Karen, or something equally white. Two kids, at least one girl… And one day she’s coming home, telling her parents she’s a lesbian and in love with a black Democrat…*

It’s a pretty effective tactic, at least it was in those moments and although it drove the prosecutor and cops almost insane, that the one incarcerated Son that was supposed to be easily crumbled suddenly was immovable, despite having been abandoned by the club and without other friends, family or protection. By pretending so hard he wasn’t actually there, that none of this even concerned him, Juice became untouchable. At least to some people.

“Juicy? Where are ye, lad?”

Here. There. Nowhere, everywhere, anywhere. Stuck in a loop again, with the memories of long, torturing months alone or with the heavy weight of Henderson grinding him down on an examining table.

*Crying so pretty for me, chica… What’s the matter, Ortiz? Tully was that small, huh?*

No, but he was… careful. No unnecessary pain. Henderson thrusts like he’s trying to stab him with his dick. He gets off on it, the way Juice is helplessly cuffed on the paper covered steel, how he’s trying not to show how much it hurts, that his hole is on fire, that he’s ill with it and can’t zone out.
Please, stop… Please… I won't tell, I promise, just… please stop…

“Please stop… Henderson, please…”
“Juicy! Juicyboy, look at me, lad! Ye’re not there anymore, lovey! T’is me, Chibs. Ye’re havin’ a flashback, tha’ arsehole isn’t here, he can’t hurt ye no more.”

But he can. The memory has a life and will of its own and Juice is trapped in it again, the absolute vulnerability, the humiliation and pain. Only now, Chibs is letting it happen.

“I’m sorry, Chibs, please don’t let him… Please, help me! Jax… Jax?! I’m sorry!”

The golden boy is watching too, icy stare that sees right through Juice, like he’s a piece of lucid flesh.

“Juicy, be still. Tig! Tig!? Christ, just be still for a moment, lad… It’ll sting a bit, have to hold ye down… I’m so, so sorry, love… Hold him, Tig!”

He’s being pierced again. A firm grip, heavy weight to keep him down and then it stings in his left buttock and Juice lets out something between a squeal and a sob. It’s over in a second, his pants pulled back up and Juice tries to fight this attacker who keeps shifting faces.

“S’allright, love… Ye’ll be fine, I promise…”
“Juice, you’re just having a flashback. It’s gonna be okay. Stop fucking fighting us, you moron!”
“Wrong fucking time for tha’, Tiggy. Wrong fucking time.”
“You’ve called that doc yet?”
”Aye. She’ll be here in a coupla hours.”
”Incognito?”
”No, with bloody… sirens on. Jesus Christ, Juice, stop fighting me, lad! Of course it’s incognito!”

His body is getting heavier again and although he’s starting to recognize Chibs’ and Tig’s voices and the others seem to get a little lower, Juice is still on the examining table where small stains of blood are coloring the course paper cover.

**Natural lube, chica… Getting your pussy wet for me… Such an eager little slut…**

The voices are muffled now, the pain slowly dying off, but Juice isn’t going anywhere. He’s left on the table, crying and begging with a voice that turns smaller and more quiet by the second.

“Please, stop… Please, Chibbie…”

Please don’t let them do this.

Please help me.

Please kill me.
Hi there, lovely readers! I've had a crazy busy week, so I've not been able to finish this chapter until right now this morning. It's a Chibbie pov chapter taking place a few hours after Juice's panic attack/flashback. And since I live in a country with free healthcare and of corpse has no idea how it works with outlaws getting medical treatment off the record, you'll have to abide with all the very possible impossibilities here (as usual^^)
*kisses and hugs* <3<3<3

“Pres?”

Chibs looks up from the half empty tea cup, seeing Rat in the doorway.

“She’s here.”
“Who?”
”Uhm, the doc.”

He knows he’s old, thinking the doc would be a he, but Chibs guesses some things are too hard to change. It makes him think of Tara, though, and that’s a memory hurting bad because she was innocent in all the shite, she did good things for people, for the club and had she still been alive… Well, there’s no point in the what if:s now. The woman Rat shows inside, is perhaps in her fifties, quite tall and with her black hair in a thick braid.

“Mr. Telford?”
"Aye. Welcome, doctor…”?
"Jensen. Paula Jensen.”
"Venus told ye wha’ we needed?”
"The whole list, Mr. Telford.”
“Please, Chibs is fine.”
“Chibs, then. One of your members is bringing the scale in.”
“Scale?”

She smiles at his confusion.

“She’s Chibs’ type of doc. Efficiant, intelligent and apparently knowing fairly well that treating semi-outlaws isn’t exactly an easy business. They sit down in the small office – Chucky of course comes running with some coffee the poor woman is too well-mannered to decline – and Chibs politely looks over Paula Jensen’s credentials, because this is apparently a bloody serious doc, even when slipping over to the unofficial business.

“He’s got PTSD and… malnutrition?”
“Aye. Constipated as hell too.”
It’s somehow difficult to discuss this. Putting Juice on display like this, even if it’s necessary, and Chibs feels his scarred cheeks heat a bit from having to answer the clinical questions of Juice’s broken body and mind. It kinda feels like he’s embarrassing him, but the rational part of Chibs’ mind soon takes over and reminds him this is what needs to be done. This is fucking important and good and the doc clearly wasn’t scoring low in her classes.

“You have a list of his medicines?”
“Uhm… Right here. He’s had five mil of the Stesolid this mornin’, don’ know if Venus told ye.”
“She did. How’s he been drinking? Eating?”

There’s a lot of fucking questions and Chibs answers them as well as he can. The nightmares, panic attacks and flashbacks he’s been witnessing. The pain and stress rattling Juice’s underweight body. How he’s having a hard time keeping food down and yes, just enough about the threats – the fact that there are such – and that he’s had a “rough time on the inside”.

“Sexual assault?”

This doc isn’t suffering any bullshit and Chibs knows that the pause while he’s looking for an appropriate answer, is answer enough.

“Hasn’t told me any details.”
“Unsurprisingly.”

Hard ass lass. Of course she is. Otherwise, Venus wouldn’t have called her. She’s browsing through the few papers in Juice’s folder from the hospital and then a small stack of papers from another that she’s taking from her bag. When Chibs raises an eyebrow, she almost rolls her eyes.

“Please, Chibs. You think I’m some kinda’ quack treating a PTSD patient without some proper research first? By the way, it will show on the bill.”
“I take it ye prefer cash, doc?”
“Unless you want me to treat that poor bastard with snake oil.”
“How much?”
“Don’t worry, I know Samcro’s good for it.”

Chibs snorts.

”Aye, but are ye, doc?”

Paula Jensen just raises from the chair.

”Shall we?”

Showing her into Juice’s room goes fairly easy. The lads know she’s no drool and whistle material and quickly move out of her and Chibs’ way. The fact that she’s not dressed up, but wears loose fitting jeans, jogging shoes and has strains of hair hanging loosely from her long braid, only seems to add to her self-evident pondus. She’s here to make a job, not an impression and Chibs is almost about to tell her again about the patient in question and his sensitivity, but Paula Jensen is already knocking very softly on the door to Juice’s, for lack of a better word, guestroom and Chibs clears his voice.

“Juicy? Tig?”
”C’mon in.”
The VP sits in the chair, looking pleased with himself and Chibs throws a suspicious glance at the curled form on the bed.

“Wha’ did ye do to’im?”

“Nothing. Just told him you’d be back soon with a doc. Hello, by the way, I’m Tig.”

“Hello, Tig, I’m Paula. Now, I need some working space…”

She almost shoos the VP away and Chibs shakes his head as he’s seeing that particular, horny glimpse Tig always gets when a woman with one of the few kinds of authority he respects, shows no respect or fear what so ever, for his cut and knife. It's a relief having the door closed and Chibs carefully approaches the bed.

“Juicy?”

The man gives a small whimper and for a second, Chibs wants to show the doc out, protect Juice from her gaze and judgement, but the logic takes over and instead, Chibs just sits down next to him and starts stroking his hair.

“Juice? S’alright, lad. Her name’s Paula an’ she’s a doc. S’all incognito, love, no one’s gonnae force ye away or anything. She’s safe.”

It takes time. Time Chibs honestly isn’t used to have, not even after these last weeks, but his former impatience with shite that’s not effectively walking towards a goal, seems to have disappeared. And Samcro may have turned more and more legit, but the club has also become better at saving for the future, instead of blowing every nickel on weapons, drugs and security. Not to mention lawyers and hospital bills. Yes, they earn less now, but the income sources are far more steady and less likely to caught the eyes of law enforcement.

Paula Jensen is as calm and kind as she’s efficient. It takes almost ten minutes before Juice will even look at her, another ten of gentle talking until he’s ready to let her near. Chibs is worried she’ll want him to leave the room, but she doesn’t. Not yet, at least.

He’s seen Juice’s body so many times, in the good old days and now, but he can’t seem to get used to the sight. The doc manages to get the man to undress on top and she makes all the usual shite: temperature, blood pressure, pulse, listening to that little broken heart and lungs. She really has all the tools she could possibly fit in a car with her, measuring the oxygen levels and grunts as they’re a bit low, before asking Chibs to put the oxygen halter on and place the tube on a steady surface. Needles are a bit more difficult, but she’s very gentle and Chibs holds Juice’s other hand as well as leaning down to try a soothe him with useless words, while Paula takes her samples. At least the lad’s veins are cooperating and it’s done pretty quickly.

Getting Juice on the scale is not easy either, but blessed be the doc, because it’s formed like a chair and after a little struggle, the shaking, skinny form is place on it. The numbers make the doc grunt and she shakes her head.

“120 pounds. This… this is bad. At least 22 pounds underweight. And I mean at least.”

"He was diagnosed with malnutrition.”

"Yeah, that’s pretty obvious, Mr. Telford, but what’s been done to treat it?"

“Uhm… we’ve tried to make’im eat what he can stomach. Mostly those milkshaky things Venus makes…”

“Smoothies?”
"Aye, tha’s the name."
"Homemade?"
"Aye."
"Well, that’s something…"

The tone is one of discontent but there’s no surprise and she’s not one to waste time on lecturing. She just makes a note and then takes to look at Juice’s eyes, ears and throat. Her patient is unusually cooperative and Chibs silently thinks it’s more due the fact that Juice is bending easily for authorities when he feels weak and worried, rather than any actual relaxation from the doc’s way of treating him. The sedatives work well too. But she’s good, really good, and Chibs is relieved they’re not in a busy hospital with all the sounds, the sharp lights, the smells and worries.

She saves the worst for last. Putting pressure on that tiny bloody stomach is torture and Juice almost cries. It’s difficult to know what’s inflammation and what’s psychosomatic, but his reactions speak loud enough. Juice all but looses it when he realises which kind of samples she asks for and instinctively curls up in fetus position again. It wont happen, Chibs just knows that and Paula only tries to persuade him once before Juice’s white face and cramped fists give it away. No one’s getting even close to the lad’s crotch or arse unless they want a full-on panic attack. Paula just nods and pats Juice’s hand.

“I’d never force you, Juice. It would be easier for me to give treatment with those samples, but I can go with your hospital records on that one for now. Okay? No need to panic.”

She continues to speak to Juice for a little while, just reassuring him that it’s alright, that there’s a good chance he’ll be up and running again, but it’ll take some time. Chibs’ experience as a medic translates that into lot of fucking work on all parts included in this. Juice is so exhausted after the examination, the small dosis of sedatives is barely necessary for him to collapse, but Chibs still needs to discuss shite with the doc and if the lad is asleep, it’ll be far easier.

He sits by the bed, holding his hand, stroking that hair, not caring about what the doc might think of it. The image Chibs gives of his relationship with Juice. Right now, all he wants is to make the man he mostly think of as lad or boy, feel safe. And for the first time since he set eyes on the markings from the chain around his neck for what seems like a lifetime ago, Chibs starts to think he’s doing something close to the right thing.
Chapter 91

Chapter Summary

As always, check the tags for potential TW:s.

He’s not really noticing the changes in the surroundings as much as he feels them. There’s not silence, but simply soft, unthreatening sounds of doors, steps and hands moving and lifting things. Of water taps turned on and off, of a fan’s low buzzing and sometimes the beeps from medical equipment Juice’s sleep clouded brain seems to have learned to recognize as unthreatening. He’s sleeping most of the time, drifting in and out of it too, but it doesn’t disturb him.

His sore muscles are resting on a mattress that doesn’t have lumps or foam rubber in it. It doesn’t put further pressure on his bones, but allows them to rest and the hands that turn him every hour or so, know how to place him to avoid bedsore. The sheet isn’t cheap cotton and polyester mix, but linen. Real linen smelling weakly from lavender and fabric softener. There’s a warm feather duvet, the feather pillows have slightly cool cases, also in linen. Juice isn’t dressed in a hospital apron either, but loose boxers and a washed out tanktop, soft enough to almost fall into threads. He didn’t hear the doc speak of the importance of soft materials closest to his body but if he could agree in sleep, he would.

Juice moves a little under the duvet, not restlessly or anxiously, but the normal shifting of position you do in your sleep. The IV and oxygen halter aren’t getting out of position and nothing hurts. On the bedside table, there’s a blue binder filled with various schedules and lists Juice would be embarrassed about if he was awake and clear enough to look through it. Not so much about the details of his medical problems, but for the scrupulously care of him it indicates. Timetables for IV, temperature, dosis of meds and turnings in bed. Neat lines for notes, checkboxes, some of them already filled with different handwritings. Two of them more frequent, a couple of others less often. Some days when the man with the scars looks over them at night, the notes are comforting reading, others less so. Some are better than others.

Sleeping like this, is an immeasurable blessing. The fever comes and goes but is never dangerously high and if Juice could hear the voices speaking quietly by his bed, he’d know that the infection is responding well to the antibiotics and what looked like a possible ulcer, has been nipped in the bud just in time.

He’s been injured badly lots of times before. He’s been sitting in a hospital bed joking about shitting blood after being stabbed dangerously close to a permanent kidney damage. Bleeding from *not* taking it up the ass. That’s some fucking irony. Sometimes he has nightmares, or at least the beginning of them. His mind wanders off to chains and snapping branches, cold invitations to eat his gun, backs turning from him and then the sound of cuffs against stainless steel.

Punishment. Payment. Atonement. The silence… *His* silence.

Behind closed eyelids, Juice sees the prison infirmary, feels the hands of the prison doc trying to take his, and the frown from the man as his patient just turns away.
I know what this is, Ortiz, and I’ve reported it to the warden, but I can’t do anything to help you, unless you give me a name… And this ink removal. I really hate to report this, since whoever did this for once seemed to know what the hell he was doing. But this is serious, Ortiz. The only reason you’re not thrown into the hole for that, is because of the assault and me pulling some strings. You hear me? You’ll have to give me something.

You have to give them something. Your money, your words, your silence. Your heart and mind. Your body… Strip, bend over, shut up, hold still. Wipe off, erase, bleed for it, you goddamn half-breed. So desperate to belong and yet you never will. Not in full and you know it. You were always disposable…

Juice gasps in his sleep and skilled hands prepare an injection according to one of the medical sheets, tapping on the syringe to get rid of air bubbles before wiping off the momentarily cuffed arm where once there was ink. Where it should be scars from a knife, burn marks or at the very least a black blob telling a story of something that once was but isn’t anymore. But the scars are small and too bright to be seen from a distance. No pest mark telling the still pure ones that an infected rat is approaching. A life not covered or buried, but almost completely erased.

In his sleeping yet rushing mind, Juice is back in prison, but not on the steel examination table, protected custody or solitary. He’s waking up in his bunk, sore and exhausted, face sticky from nightly crying and arm and chest aching from something far worse than physical pain. He’s tried not to look at the work, kept it covered at all times possible and even refused showers the first two weeks afterwards. Then Tully got sick of sharing cell with a reeking punk and bought the single shower for half an hour, making sure Juice got himself clean. He’d even managed to get hold on some good shower supplies, bribing his most trusted guard. That might have been the nicest thing Tully did for him.

He remembers standing in the single shower stall, having five whole minutes just to get properly clean in peace and quiet. Scrubbing, shaving and yes, being reminded from the other side of the curtain, to not remove the plastic covers around the healing ink. Had Juice not been so grateful for the shower and equally afraid of angering Tully, he might have tried to ruin it on purpose, but by then he’d accepted his role, too subdued and self-hating to even consider rebellion. And the secluded, warm shower, was a blessing no dead man could count on. When Tully had knocked on the wall and Juice didn’t answer, too busy enjoying the hot water, the shot caller had come inside the stall and Juice had startled and then simply faced the wall, prepared for giving himself up once again.

Maybe it was too messy with the water, fuck did Juice know, but the nazi hadn’t done anything like that. Just touched his shoulder lightly, reminding with low voice that time was almost up.

Feeling better, baby? We gotta leave soon, you know. Lets get you dry, sweetheart… Brought you some moisturizer for that pretty skin of yours…

But that’s the thing. It wasn’t his skin anymore. Juice as he once was, as he’d known himself to be, had ceased to exist. Whatever this was, the piece of meat getting rubbed in with lotion by its owner, it wasn’t Juice Ortiz, or even Juan Carlos Ortiz. Only the shell of a human, void of purpose, direction or even will. Like the dripping lotion it had poured out, little by little, starting with a bullshit arrest for selling weed he had a license for.

The dream isn’t upsetting him anymore, the injection has served it’s purpose and his mind is floating again. But the images are still there, only not causing panic and fear. Tully and the shower stall fade away and Juice can see himself on the examination table again. How it cuts into his hipbones, scraping small wounds onto the skin there, grinding his cock hard against the surface because the
man stabbing him with his dick loves all the ways he can make it hurt just a little bit more. It’s not primarily Juice’s ass that gets him off, but his pain, the markings of it, all the small sounds and moves he’s learned to recognize as Juice’s muffled agony.

The injection doesn’t take away the nightmare, but it shifts the view, the role. It’s like seeing himself, but not really care. It could just as well be a complete stranger on that steel, trying to keep some kind of dignity despite knowing it’s futile. Sooner or later, that paper cover now stained with spit, blood and sweat, will have tears on it too…

He’s turning his head in a pathetic attempt to cover up his wet cheeks, but suddenly, there’s no coarse paper cover there, nor the cheap cotton fabrics of prison sheets or the hard mangled hospital bedclothes, but unbleached linen smelling from lavender. He’s not seeing it, just feeling and smelling. The musty air in the examination room, reeking from rubbing alcohol and anxiety, is changing, as if someone opened a really large window to let whatever wind scate through. This one brings herbs and motor oil with it. And carbolic soap.

Juice opens his eyes with a gasp and he sees the bucket held in front of him, but despite the uncomfortable tug in his sore guts, he’s not feeling sick. Just…

When he lifts his eyes, seeing Chibs there, the man who told him to eat his gun, Juice is not aware of that he’s still partially dreaming, only registrating that the man he stupidly, desperately hoped would save him from himself at the diner, is really there and with a force he shouldn’t be capable of in this condition, Juice sits up and throws himself at him.

He’s mumbling, whimpering about how sorry he is, how he never meant to hurt anyone, or the club, that he knows he doesn’t deserve any forgiveness, but please, stop this. Don’t take him back to the room.

“Which room are ye talking ’bout, lovey?”
“That... the exa... exami...”
“The examination room? At the hospital?”
“No... no, the... clinic at... at Stockton… Please, Chibs, I promise I’ll...”
“Shh, hush now, my lil’ one... Ye’re having another nightmare, lovey. No one’s hurting ye no more. T’is just a dream, Juicyboy. S’alright, ye’re alright. Don’ have to say ye’re sorry, lad.”

It takes a few minutes in Chibs’ arms for Juice’s mind to separate dream from reality, flashback from actual repeating of the violations in prison. He buries his face in the crook of Chibs’ neck, embarrassed of his display of weakness but still not completely out of the horrors of the nightmare and he shudders.

“You came... Wasn’t sure you’d...”
“Where, kiddo?”
“The diner... You... you should’ve killed me, Chibbie. Would’ve been better...”
“No. No, don’ talk like tha’, Juicy. Never wanted to put tha’ bullet in yer head an’ I’ll always regret not goin’ after ye, not listening to ye...”
“Wasn’t fair... Was supposed to... go to Stockton...”
“What are ye talking about?”
“My punishment...”

Juice takes a deep breath.

“Had to... pay for my sins... S’all fair, right?”
“No. No, no, no, don’ bloody go there, kid!”

Chibs puts a little distance between them, to cradle Juice’s face and he forces him to look straight at him. Dark, pepper eyes. Not hazel like Tully’s or blue like Jax’s. Chibs’ are warm and firm. A focus point in this absolute mess.

“Look at me, Juice. See it’s me, right?”
"Yeah… Chibbie…”
“Good. Now, ye listen to me, lovey. Ye know Samcro, ye know how we deal with ex-communications. Right?”
“Yeah…”
"Ye remember Kyle, right? Why did we burn his ink off?”
"He… he should’ve… removed it, but didn’t…”
"Exactly. Hence the blowtorch. Then, we dropped him off at the ER. Clay… we blacked it out, but nothin’ more. Even if he’d deserved it."
“Met Mr. Mayhem…”
"Aye, but tha’s not my point, lad."

The thumbs strokes Juice’s cheeks and Chibs leans closer to bump heads before looking at him again, eyes pained and filled with a regret Juice can’t stand to see on his former brother.

“No one in the fucking history of Samcro, or Sons Of Anarchy for tha’ matter, has been turned over as a… fuck toy to bloody nazis in prison as a… payment for anything. Holy Mother o’ Christ, Juice, no one, no one would’ve accepted tha’, had Jax brought it to the table. Especially not me. An’ this… piece o’ shite guard… The chinks, the Aryans…”
“Tully’s dead.”
“An’ tha’s a pity, ‘cause I gladly would’ve made’is last journey as slow an’ miserble as possible.”

Juice laughs. A small, pitiful one, lacking any real joy or relief.

“He saved my life. Had it not been for him, I’d be dead. Or maybe I’d ratted again.”
“Wha’ do ye mean?”

It’s such a conflicted memory and Juice hates the fact that Tully somehow managed to deny him the possibility to truly hate him. The time with the Aryan shot caller has so many layers, most of them ugly, but most isn’t all. Juice swallows.

“He… I know this sounds… like I’m a fucking loon, straightjacket and cucko’s nest and all, but Tully looked after me. He’s the reason I had even a chance in hell to make it through… Why I managed to keep silent.”
“He was a bloody monster, Juice.”
“Yeah, but it was Jax who unleashed him.”

Maybe it’s the meds magic finally working, because it doesn’t hurt to say the words. Not more than he can handle. He closes his eyes.

“When I’m… when I have those dreams, Tully’s not… what causes them, you know.”

It’s not Tully’s rapes that give him nightmares and flashbacks. They should, but the mind has an extraordinary way of making fucked up ways of dealing with the worst.

“The guard… Henderson.”
Chibs sounds too calm, almost casual as he names the main source of Juice’s worst nightmares that don’t wear Samcro’s patch, but a badge and billy. Handcuffs. So called protected custody.

*Wakey wakey, chica. I’d say rise and shine, but you can stay in bed a little longer… I brought you breakfast in bed… Couldn’t get hold on any roses, though.*

“He… he liked it when… when he knew it hurt. Like… really fucking hurt. Tully never… he was gentle, but Henderson…”

He keeps talking, telling. How after a while, it almost stopped hurting. That he passed out faster, got better at zoning out, more difficult to wake up and bring back to the stainless steel. Fewer tears but more bruises. Not that it mattered. He was so hollow by then, there simply wasn’t anything left to take. At least that’s what he told himself. It was what made it possible to not try and finish the work the tree branch and Tully failed at.

"I’m not even angry with him, Chibs. Or Jax. I fucked up, I wanted to pay for it. I **had** to."

"But not like that… Not like that, Juicyboy… Mary, Mother o’ Christ, lad, had I known…”

“I know, brother. I know.”

He has no right calling Chibs that anymore and isn’t even sure he needs to, but this is Juice’s way of acknowledging that while they were still brothers, Chibs never agreed to selling him out like that and he never would’ve. Not as long as he wore the patch, perhaps not even stripped from it. Chibs is the kind of man preaching never to use more violence than death requires. He doesn’t like torture, doesn’t feel more powerful or in control by making some bastard twitch and scream. Pain for the pure sake of it, simply isn’t his style. He’s Happy’s opposite, absolutely, but more so, he’s Jax’s even if the stubborn, loyal Scot probably doesn’t know it himself.

“God almighty… Ye didn’t deserve being… bloody **raped**, Juice.”

There it is. The word Juice’s mind has managed to wrap up in so many protecting layers of numbness, it can’t hurt him unless he’s actually speaking it out loud. Or hears someone doing it for him.

Fucked. Claimed ass. Punk ass bitch. **Don’t be an asshole.**

*Trust me. All I am in here is somebody’s asshole.*

Juice has nothing more to say now. All he can do, is waiting for the sobbing to stop by itself, for the unwanted tears and humiliation to be soaked up by Chibs’ hoodie. For the years of ongoing pain to allow a small breather, a sliver of peace. Just a little ray of light for a former Son who wanted to shine.
Chapter 92

He finds her outside by the picnic tables and can tell right away, she’s less than pleased. With him, herself, the situation, but even though she came here against both her parents will, reckless in a way Chibs honestly didn’t think she could be, he’s still feeling guilty, as he probably should. Chibs stands in the doorway for a while, just looking at his daughter under the parasol. She’s brought a stack of books with her and by the way they’re scattered out over the table and how she’s hunching over them, she seems to make herself busy.

Chibs walks over and just rolls his eyes when the lass doesn’t bother to look up.

“Hi there…”

Now she looks up and Chibs immediately recognizes the look of poorly hidden worry. He gives her his old, genuine smile he used to have for her before Jimmy O. made him a new one.

“What are ye readin’?”
“‘The citric acid cycle.’
“‘The what?’
“‘Biochemistry.’
“‘Oh. S’it fun?’
“‘Ye tell me. Ye’re the one blowing shite up. I’m just reading the theory.”

He should probably snap back at her, for being rude to her old man or something, but Chibs doesn’t blame her. In fact, he quite like seeing his little lass with a bit of a backbone. She’s always seemed so shy the few times they’ve met on their own, without Fiona present. Chibs knows it’s not her fault, of course it isn’t, and she’s old and smart enough to know it’s not easy for him either. Jimmy was never her da, even if she felt forced to call him that, and Chibs honestly doesn’t know how it’s like to grow up with parents like him, Fiona or Jimmy for that matter.

So, Chibs treads lightly, smiles again and lights a fag.

“Thought ye were into medicine, not explosives.”
"The cause always needs people. So does Sambel.”

He almost drops the lighter and fag, just starring at her, coughing when he inhales too deep and the bloody lass just laughs.

“Relax, da. I’m not as stupid as ye an’ maw.”

Chibs snorts at that, shaking his head, but he doesn’t correct her. No one ever said joining True IRA was a smart move, just the right one. At least it was back then. Nowadays, Chibs isn’t so sure. He nods at the book.

”Ye’re not plannin’ on droppin’ out, then?”
“As I said: I’m not as stupid as ye.”
“Oh yeah? Ye think any of us had a bleedin’ chance in hell goin’ to uni in the first place, lass?”
“Yea, yer lives were rough, I know. Ye don’ think maw’s been tellin’ me tha’ for years? How bloody hard it was for ye? Wha’ was it? A ten miles walk to get some water an’ there was a hole in the bucket?”
“Aye, an’ we had to rise an’ shine before we went to bed.”

A small smile twitches in the corner of her mouth and Chibs knows he’s doing the same. But then she turns serious again.

“I’ve never had a friend, tha’ wasn’t checked off by maw or Jimmy, or Father Ashby, da. I have no siblings, no cousins… Trinity, she… We were just hanger-ons to our maws. Ye have no idea what a fucking alien I feel like at uni.”

“Feelin’ anymore at home here?”

She doesn’t answer that and Chibs almost instinctively reaches a hand out to her cheek, stroking it very lightly. She nods in the direction of the dorm.

“It’s PTSD, right?”

Chibs nods.

“Aye. Any experience witnessing it?”

“Not really. There’s a lass at campus though. She was gang raped last term.”

“At campus?”

“Aye.”

She holds up a hand, stopping the tirade before it can start.

“Look, da, I’m careful, an’ if anyone tries anything with me, I’ll threat’em with ma IRA maw an’ MC pres da.”

“Way to blow a cover, lass.”

“Jesus, da… I don’ need a bloody lecture, alright? I’m just… I don’t know… sorta lonely.”

Chibs is about to give another lecture of how everyone gets fucking lonely every now and then, but as much as he’s not the typical da, his lass isn’t the typical daughter. This isn’t a typical life even though a lot of their problems are as common as could be, if you just look at them from the outside. He takes her hand.

“I know it’s hard, but… ye’ re a smart, sweet lass, probably having lads after ye in tons… An’ ye know I’ll have’em all fucking gelded, if they lay a hand on ye, right?”

“Maw’s already given me the virginity lecture, so ye can stop right now.”

“Oh, I don’ give a fuck about virginity, Kerri. Ye’re private life aint any o’my business. Neither is it yer mother’s.”

“Then what’s yer point?”

“Only tha’ if some fucking twat gets in his mind ye’re his to do with as he wants, ye’re letting yer parents know.”

“Of course.”

“An’ please, don’ get knocked up. Raisin’ a wee one on yer own when ye’re barely grown up aint a good idea. Samcro lads are, by the way, very much off limits.”

“Wha’ happened to ‘aint any o’my business’?”

“Did I say tha’?”

“Aye, ye did. An’ ye don’ have to worry ’bout yer lads.”

“Good.”

“I’ m a bean flicker.”
"Venus sent me. With this."

The man in the doorway seems hesitant, which is quite many steps away from murderous. Juice doesn’t feel much at the moment. Just tired and heavy. The bed really is heavenly on what’s left of his carcass and since the talk with Chibs, he’s slept surprisingly well. He’s completely forgotten about the injection.

Tig comes closer, putting down a glass with some pink looking beverage, decorated with a tiny green leaf on the bedside table.

"Some kind of nutritional drink, she said. Doc’s orders, so you’d better try and have as much of it as possible."

Juice sits up slowly, trying not to grimaze, to put his weakness any more on display than it already is. Tig arranges the pillows, building a small support for Juice’s back and if he wasn’t so heavy with meds, Juice would’ve jumped from the surprise alone. Once he’s steady enough, he takes the offered glass.

"Thanks."

It has a straw and for a second, Juice thinks it’s fucking ridiculous, but thinking about it, he’s not that steady with his head, nor his hands right now. Straw it is. Tig rolls his eyes.

"Don’t know why the fuck she couldn’t just keep it in the box it came in."

Because she’s nice and too good for this world, that’s why, and Juice is pretty sure Tig already knows that. He takes a small sip of the pink content and it tastes like raspberry. He could manage this. Hopefully. He faces Tig’s incredulous eyes again.

"I’m sorry… About all this. Me coming here and…"
"Don’t start, man. I’m no longer used to drama."
"Venus has changed you."
"Yeah."

One more sip, then another. Then he has to lay down and Tig takes the glass.

"You’ve barely finished a quarter of this shit."
"Can’t get anymore of it down…"

He’s tensing. Tig even talking to him, is more than Juice deserves and Venus has been so kind… He’s ungrateful. A rat. A fucking coward. Prison bitch…

"Hey! Moron!"

Tig’s way of bringing him back is more rough, a pretty light slap on his cheek that normally would barely make him twitch, but now it stings. It works though and Juice is back in the room before his head has had a chance to move him back to prison. Tig sits down on the bedside and takes his hand.
“You really think I’d get away with even yelling at you, when my old lady has made herself your personal nurse, huh?”

The man shakes his head and suddenly Juice remembers how he – how they all – met Venus for the first time and how Tig was completely fucking lost there and then, the very moment she walked through the door. Juice smiles, because it’s a pretty funny memory.

“You’re so whipped, Tig.”
“Says the kid who made our pres turn this place into a fucking sick ward for his new dick interest. Can’t understand why… I mean, you’ve always looked like a moron with those fucking head tats, man. Chucky with ink and hands.”
“Fuck you too.”
“How did you get it off like that, by the way?”

He’s taking a grip on Juice’s left arm, where the Reaper used to be, but now only shows a very bleak form of an outlined tattoo, one can’t even mistake for the original form anymore. Juice swallows.

“Tully had money and connections. He bribed one of the guards who’s brother had an ink shop.”
“Well, guards don’t get much paid, I guess, but this… man, this is some seriously good work. Must’ve cost a fortune.”

Juice pulls him arm away, wishing he had something more than just a wifebeater on. Tig glances on his chest and Juice knows he doesn’t have to, but fuck it, the ink is real estate belonging to Samcro and members, especially a VP, have every right to see if the rules have been followed. Juice lifts the cotton fabric.

“You can check for yourself.”

Five in total and before it could be bleached out like Tully wanted, they had to black some of it, just to make sure no Son or friend of them saw them untouched. The chest hurt the most, from what Juice remembers. Somehow, even more than the rapes, his status as punk, the erasing of the ink felt like an assault. Like he was a piece of meat, an animal, a property who had gotten a new owner and needed it’s tags changed.

Tig looks… impressed.

“Whoever did it knew his shit.”
“You’re done watching?”
“Yeah. He did those stupid head things too?”
“No.”
“Pity.”

It’s just Tig. It’s who he is, who he always was, but Juice no longer has the strength to brush it off.

“Man, I’m sorry… Fuck, I didn’t mean to be an asshole, Juice.”
“Please leave… I… I’m tired…”

And he doesn’t want to cry in front of this man. Or anyone, for that matter. Chibs is one thing, Juice is almost comfortable with letting him see his weakness by now, but others are a different matter and Tig is just… well, he’s Tig and he didn’t even like Juice when things were good.

“Try and have some more of that drink when you can.”
“Yeah…”
“And uhm… I’m okay with this, Juice. You being here, Venus looking after you, the bleaching thing… Chibs all fucking tied up in knots over you… Some day, we gotta talk about what you did, but until you can, I’m fine with the club having your back.”
“Thanks.”

It sounds so pathetic. Too little, too ungrateful when this is something that would never have happened before. Samcro taking a chance, spending time, money and effort on getting someone like Juice back on his feet, despite everything that’s happened. New facts added or not.

Tig walks out and when the door is closed again, Juice lets out a breath he didn’t know he was holding. It hurts. The pneumonia may be long since healed, but anxiety has a very disturbing way of nestling itself in the chest, getting it all knotted up.

Juice hates his skin for several reasons. Had it not been for it, for his unfortunate heritance, he never would’ve been threatened by Roosevelt in the first place. It’s always felt like he’s lying, like he has to lie, in order to be accepted into any gang. Halfbreeds and especially those who passes for not being one, are never popular with gangs. They want simplicity and Juice understands that. The racism he’s lived with all his life, has come in many forms and gangs survive only when they feel like a true pack. The MC felt different, but of course it wasn’t. Not really. Clay’s blatant racism was normal to them all, maybe also accepted in a way you accept old people who can’t, or simply just don’t want to change.

He also hates it for the story it tells. The tattoos may have been bleached out, but even without looking, Juice could draw a finger around the original edges and feel the emptiness. What the Reaper took back, harvested along with all the things Juice was too stupid to understand he sowed. He wasn’t even worthy of a black blob, a burn mark or knife cuts to cover up but still wear the failure and betrayal on his skin. Kyle and Clay probably wouldn’t agree, especially not Kyle, but Juice can’t feel grateful for this. Especially since it wasn’t his former brothers who had it removed, but a fucking nazi, and not really for making sure his punk didn’t anger Samcro more than his alive status already did, but because he wanted him pretty.

It’s good the meds are working so well right now. Juice isn’t panicking from the thoughts, not even getting into an anxiety loop. He just cries.

Though curled under the duvet, with one of the soft feather pillows and it’s clean and fresh case of linen in his arms like a teddy, crying and crying like he’s not had enough of it already. Had he been able to reach the clear and calm part of his mind now, Juice would’ve been able to remind himself of how futile it is, trying to put a measure on grief. Especially when you’re barely aware that’s what a lot of all this is really about.

This sorrow has long, messy roots in so many directions. Some of them can be dug up, others go too deep and have taken hold. Samcro has been dug up and it hurt so bad, he couldn’t bare to do anything but shut off. Others, like his father, was never there to begin with, or at least so small and weak it didn’t seem like it mattered at all. It’s there, immovable, but not causing damage unless it’s touched. Another belongs to Clay and it’s a crooked one, to some extent still sucking those small drops of nourishment the former pres’ few kind words gave it. The one leading to Jax, is like a long thorn, scraping up more wounds as soon as it’s moved or touched. Impossible to dig out without causing a worse wound, ripping all things left of worth to shreds.

The ones leading to his mother and sister, is not pretty or very comfortable, but it makes no actual damage. It just itches if he’s stupid enough to scratch it too much and at least that’s something he’s
learned not to do.

Another one has its roots in Tully. A thick, steady one, neither with thorns nor that deep, but it’s determined to stay and serves as much as a poisonous weed as a fucking beanstock to climb up on. The nazi destroyed him, yes, but also built him up to something that was unable to just lay on the ground and die. Constantly watered and nourished with a care and protection Juice never wanted and ultimately hoped would be in vain, that he’d die before it could make any difference. But Juice was a good little garden helper, the shame and absolute sense of worthlessness, made it possible for Tully to have his little hobby. It wasn’t until the asshole died and some fucker thought his punk was ready to get a new owner, that Juice realised what had been growing in that sick little nazi garden, was a backbone.

The last one is, if possible, far more painful and Juice couldn’t even bare to recognise it’s existence until he got out. For three years it refused to wither. It’s colors, blue and white like the flag, faded and the petals went creased and wilted, but it was there, just wouldn’t be removed no matter how the rest of Juice’s living parts, one after another, turned into worm food.

That’s what he’s left with, he thinks as he closes his eyes. A new backbone he didn’t ask for, instead of the one he should’ve grown himself, and a pathetic little flower in Scottish colors, the Reaper somehow missed with His scythe.

It’s something. It’s nothing.

It’s everything.
"For a man as well-known with the locals as you, and with a legal business, you’ve proven to be quite difficult to find, pres."
“I’m not yer pres, Father.”
“No, Obama is, and for that I should think even you ought to be grateful.”
“I’m Scottish and have no right to vote here.”
“Thanks to a record I’m sure you’re not stupid enough to blame someone else but yourself for.”

Chibs snickers. This man is weirdly amusing for a clerk and to be honest, Chibs isn’t really surprised that he’s pissed. Father Mark looks less out of place in the lounge than a priest should. Perhaps because he’s not wearing his collar, but a simple long-sleeved t-shirt and lightwashed jeans. A disguise as good as any. The simplest often are the most effective.


Chucky, as always in his embroidered apron and with his stupid, perpetually fearful smile like a permanent mask on his face, places a little tray with two cups, a teapot Venus must’ve bought, a bowl of sugar, a small can of cream and even a dish with sliced lemon. Father Mark gets an amused look on his face and manages not to visibly notice the Mickey Mouse hands pouring his tea.

“Thank you… what’s your name?”
“Chucky Marstein, Father.”
“Samcro’s little house elf.”

Chibs can’t help himself and he knows Chucky doesn’t take offense. Father Mark pours a sliver of cream and a sugar in his cup, thanking the house elf with another of his bloody humane smiles. Thankfully, Chucky hurries out before this British soul saviour can start one of his polite conversations with him. Chucky closes the door behind him and Father Mark takes a small sip of his tea.

“He makes decent tea.”
“ Took a while, but he learned. Eventually.”
”That’s how he lost his hands?”

Chibs just looks at him, calm and neutral.

“I know it’s fairly easy to expect us to be monsters, Father, but I’m afraid I’ll have to disappoint ye. He was harrased by some Chinese in prison and one of our now dead brothers, Otto Delaney, protected him inside. When Chucky got released, we sorta took over custody. Due to a little misunderstanding, Chucky managed to piss off our then pres and was handed over to the Chinese. They got a wee bit tired of his habit of jerking off constantly, and chopped all but his index fingers off.”
“Good Lord…”
“Aye, ye can say tha’. Anyway, our current VP, Tig, took pity on the poor bastard an’ took’im in as a worker for us. Has been here ever since, takin’ care o’ the place. A bit jumpy, but not half as daft as he seems.”
The priest nods and puts his cup down.

“How’s Juan? I’ve been quite worried, Mr. Telford.”
"Welcome to the bloody club, Father. Unfortunately, he’s not well enough for a visit yet.”
"Why didn’t you take him back to hospital?"
"Because it’s a public place an’ I aint takin’ no chances anymore. Cannae check every member o’ the staff to make sure there are no connections to the AB an’ we cannnae arrange a round the clock watch on’im there.”
“What about the witness protection program?”

Chibs snorts.

“Tha’s a joke an’ ye know tha’ as well as I do, Father. The threat against Juice, doesn’t come from just one source, alright? Unlike the MC, Aryans can pass as decent members o’ the society. We don’t hide our loyalty, Father.”
"No, you don’t. And I guess I should thank you for the… guards you put outside the vicarage. Mrs. Ellis isn’t too happy about it, but as long as they don’t touch her precious lilies, she’s coping.”
“Wha’ can I say? My boys are known to be delicate with delicate things. An’ I’m grateful for wha’ ye did for Juice.”
“You promised to keep me up to date.”
“Aye, I did an’ I am. Ye can see’im, Father, as soon as he’s strong enough for a visit.”

He sighs.

“To be honest, I’ve barely been able to keep meself up to date, Father. Have dealt with it hour by hour, it seems. He’s a wee bit better, or at least not worse. We had a doctor comin’ here, makin’ a proper exam.”
“Off the record, I assume?”
“Of course. Ye don’t have to worry, Father. I’d never let a quack treat any o’ my boys.”
“I thought Juan wasn’t one of your boys anymore.”

Chibs’ eyes hardens.

“I’m a trained army medic, Father. S’it not much but at least I know the basics an’ the closest thing to a quack o’ any kind letting anywhere near this clubhouse are masseuses givin’ good head, an’ tans* with holy water.”
“Touché.”

They sit in silence for a moment and Chibs knows he should say something. Just give a quick summary of the medical issues that currently are being dealt with, but for some reason, it’s hard to find the words.

“The doc made… new prescriptions. She’s good, really good. Careful with’im, took samples an’ all. Got these nutritional drinks on a scheduale… Venus bought new bed sheets too.”
“Venus? Oh, the transgender lady?”
“Aye. Some… I don’ know… real linen stuff she claimed would be… good on’is skin…”

Useless small talk. The priest doesn’t need to know this, but it’s not too personal, not putting Juice on display too much. Instead the seemingly ordinary, unthreatening words peels Chibs’ own layer of protection off. There’s just something about the way this man bordering between stranger and ally listens. Collar or not, he’s not the kind of priest who takes breaks from his call and that’s one of few
things Chibs thinks they have in common. Cut or cassock, collar or ink, they’re both one with the brand they once pledged their allegiance to.

A dead man on a cross, claimed to have risen from the grave. The Reaper with His cloak, black and covering as an ancient form of a monk’s robe. A man so tired of the Mayhem, so goddamn sick of all the inner and external chaos riding his body and mind, finally letting some of his persona drop to reveal the grieving human beneath the protecting surface.

This stranger who doesn’t judge, at least not right now, as he holds the head of a crying MC pres and goddamn criminal in his hands. Bringing comfort not with words, but with his presence. Silent, unjudging and patient as one of his most lost and wild sheeps, doesn’t return to the pound but at least stops running for a moment, letting the shephard come to him in the wilderness that is and always will be his home. Only once in a while, it happens to rest where the shephard might reach him. Not to bring him back, but to share the same spot until the wild sheep can return to his own path again. Maybe even with a slightly less heavy heart.

Chapter End Notes

*Irish slur for Englishmen, often used by the IRA
Chapter 95

Time heals, people say. That’s a lie, in Juice’s experience. It only makes you hollow. There’s been an empty space inside him for as long as he can remember. When he’s alone, it gets loud and messy, nothing syncs up and any attempt to sort out some order, ends up with him obsessively cleaning and organizing things outside his mind. Things he can control. A purpose, any fucking guideline to hold onto, that will lead him away from chaos.

You’re not stupid, baby, just lost. Not exactly leadership material.

It’s not even been two years since he was freed from Tully, only to get stuck with an even worse abuser. Juice recalls how absolutely numb and void he felt when Tully claimed him. His resistance had just crumbled, the only thing left being that impossibly stupid wish that keeping a nazi shot caller happy and kill Lin, would make Jax forgive him. That was never Jax’s idea at all. He even fooled Tully, which even made Juice feel content for a short moment, knowing that at least he wasn’t the only one being used as a means to an end by the golden boy.

He’d expected Tully to give another try with the shiv, or something else. Or at least humiliate and hurt him more. But in the moments when Juice served as a fuckhole for the nazi, he was never too rough, used lube and didn’t mark him with teeth or nails. After a couple of months, Tully even made sure Juice would come.

That’s probably the worst of his memories with the nazi rapist. When his body, still able to feel shit, betrayed him and he’d come over Tully’s soft hand. The first time it happened, Juice had been in such an agony afterwards, he’d tried and slam himself unconscious against the wall. To keep him off the crazy wing, Tully had coaxed a load of moonshine into him, along with benzos and held him steady to make sure he didn’t keep thrashing.

Thought you liked it, baby? Coming all over me like that... Alright then, no more fun tonight... How about I read you some poems? To pass time...

Time doesn’t heal shit.

Juice sits up a little straighter, grimazing from the stiffness in his back. The bed is nothing but a fucking dream for the weary, but he’s starting to feel sore in his muscles from the lack of movement. He’s not wearing the oxygen halter, only the IV and he doesn’t want to accidently rip it. He’s not feeling control over his body, unsure of how much strength he’s got, how much force to use in a movement. The only good thing, is that apart from muscles screaming for a little more movement, he’s not actually in any pain, neither does he feel numb.

That’s new. And good, he supposes. Whatever it is they’re giving him, it’s helping with something. Juice doesn’t realise he’s not anxious about where Chibs is at the moment. The sounds coming from the other side of the closed door are familiar, but unthreatening: voices, steps, some music. Engines and mechanic tools from the window. Some bickering and laughers.

When he rubs a hand over his face, he remembers he’s been crying. A lot. He’s sticky and needs some cold water. Or rather a shower. Juice almost moans by the thought. A long, peaceful shower all by himself... Cooling off first, then just soap himself up head to toe and rinse with water hot as fucking sun. Alone in a clean bathroom, not reeking from other cons or bleach. Shiny tile, organized shelves with a fucking army of bottles and cans – yes, Juice used to actually take care of himself,
he’s a modern man, unlike a certain Scot and his fucking carbolic soap.

Getting rid of this sweat and dirt and hellish dragon breath... what a heavenly thought, completely unfit for a man who’s supposed to be dead. The Reaper is probably furious, only too far away for Juice to actually hear.

*You’ve always been this erratic, sweetheart, or is it just the coke speaking?*

Always. Fucking always.

Once, Opie actually asked if he had ADHD. Before Juice could answer, Tara had corrected him that if, and that was a very big if, Juice had it, it was without the H. Opie, being one of the nicest and most decent brothers but perhaps not always the brightest, had looked like a question mark with beard and beanie, so Tara gave him – and Juice too, to be honest – a little lesson in how hyperactivity worked and that Juice may be restless, but definitely not hyperactive.

She was right. Juice’s messed up thoughts don’t come out physically. They stay inside his head until he’s suffocating from them and either passes out from complete exhaustion or just self-medicate with weed or blow or whatever, to keep the little fuckers silent and still. That’s why he’s not good on his own and especially not when he’s got nothing to suffocate the chaos with. His body doesn’t help him in those moments, gives no impulse to use the mess inside as reminder to work out. He’s just fidgeting with his hands, curling into a ball and feels like he’s about to fucking implode. And with nothing to fill the hollowness with, the destructive thoughts and feelings comes like on cue.

Right now, it’s not so bad. The benzos are slowing it down a lot, but Juice doesn’t like how heavy he feels from them. They may calm his body, but it doesn’t help with the feeling of being vulnerable. Too tired and heavy to move. And he needs to pee.

Juice tries to move his legs, which is fucking impossible, it seems. He’s just too heavy and too weak. Screaming for help? No way in hell. Not if someone that’s not Chibs can hear him and having to ask him for help is embarrassing enough. Problem is, while thinking of all the ways to get to the bathroom without looking weak, he’s loosing control over his bladder.

During a long, horrible moment, Juice is completely still, freezing in position really, and the self-hatred is back with a bang, now accompanied with an inner choir chanting about shame like it’s fucking *Game Of Thrones*, only instead of Cersei walking the streets naked, it’s Juice with peed pants in a bed where the Sons are laughing.

He’s almost thrown into a panic attack, despite the meds, when he realises the bed isn’t wet. He gets a hand under the duvet and gets hold on another tube and… the hell is that? He’s got some sort of… *condom* on, ending with the tube and Juice removes the bedclothes and folds down his shorts.

“Sheesus fuck, what’s…?”

It’s a catheter condom and it looks fucking weird and it’s like glued on his dick like… *seriously?* Who did this?

The threat of a panic attack calms down though, when Juice realises he’s not wetting the damn bed and doesn’t have an actual catheter in his dick. Or even worse: diapers. Juice shudders from the thought and the embarressment is spurred on a bit more before he’s able to stop and remind himself that he’s not in diapers or a soaked bed and that whatever this glued condom shit is, it’s a million times better.
He still needs a shower, though. Like, badly. And probably some instructions on how to get this glued condom thing off without skinning his dick in the process. Worrying about dignity is for the living, after all. This breathing limbo Juice currently exists in may be closer to life than in Stockton, but as he swallows the pride he shouldn’t even have left and knocks on the bedside table, he can’t help but longing for the Reaper to put an end to the healing and finally accept him.
Chapter 96

“No.”
“Ye’re sure? Said he could wait.”
“Not fucking… showing myself like this. And I reek.”
“Well, ye’ve been laying here for a few days, lad. Couldna exatly drag ye into the shower.”
“How about the washer?”
“Not even Rat fits in that, Tig already tried. An’ the priest’s in no hurry.”

Juice doesn’t even groan at the poor attempt of a joke. He looks anxious, hands fidgeting with the duvet and Chibs takes them. They’re tense, restless and warm. The lad’s eyes are dark and Chibs relises he’s more embarrassed than anything, probably about the uridome. And far more tired than he’ll admit.

“Ti’s a uridome.”
“A what?”
”The rubber tube. Was either tha’ or a cath, an’ I’m not exactly trained to put one o’ those on.”
“Still sucks.”
“Ye’d prefer a diaper?”
“Go fuck yourself.”

Embarressed? Yes. Momentarily pretty helpless? Absolutely. Broken? Not by far. Chibs can’t help but smile. He hates to admit it, but after his little outburst with the priest, he feels… lighter. A wee bit less heavy and lonely and God knows he needs all the strenght he can get now. In here, it’s Juice who’s, not weak, Chibs isn’t really inclined to use that word for the state the lad is in, but in the need of help. More than the stubborn muppet realises himself.

Chibs rubs his thumb over the skinny hands that used to be so damn strong. Grip like fucking iron.

“Ye slept well?”
”Yeah.”
”Nightmares?”
”No.”

He’s been crying though, that’s pretty obvious. The eyes are red-rimmed and he’s got no color what so ever on his cheeks. Juice doesn’t want to talk to the priest in this condition, Chibs understands that and he brings the now less fidgeting hands to his mouth, just brushing a kiss on the knuckles.

“Spoke to’im earlier. The priest.”
“Good for you.”

Adverse. Suspicious. This is the Juice Chibs has seen more glimpses of lately, and despite the clear embararrassment, withdrawl and fear it holds, it’s making Chibs relieved that the lad hasn’t become a complete wreck from all this. He’s stronger than he knows. And he needs to know others are weak too.

“I’ve been bawling me eyes out.”
“Huh?”
“Weepin’. Have been weepin’ in front o’ the priest for a good while.”
“Why?”
Chibs just glares.

"Why? ‘Cause I’ve been worried sick for ye, ye bloody muppet. Tha’s why."
"Sorry…”
“Aye, I am. For yer sake. For all the shite ye’ve been through tha’ I could’ve stopped or at least made a lot less hellish. Hurts seein’ ye so hard-pressed, lovey, aint gonnae pretend it’s not getting’ to me.”

Juice looks a little stunned and he swallows. Chibs sighs.

"Look, don’ ye worry ’bout me, Juicy. I’m a mean ol’ bastard an’ I can take it. Ye’re not a burden, or a fucking duty. Aye, I’m helpin’ ye ‘cause it’s the right thing to do, but I’d never done this for anyone but ye.”
“Not even Kerrianne?”
“Ye know wha’ I mean.”

You mean the fucking world to me and I don’t even know why yet, so don’t make me explain shite I have no words for.

He squeezes the bony hand a little harder.

"Ye need anything?"
“A new body.”

Chibs snorts at that.

“How about freshin’ up the one ye already got?”
"Doubt I can stand in a shower right now. And if I remember correctly, there’s no room for chairs in the stalls.”
“No, but we have a tub now.”
“What?”

Now Chibs snickers.

"Venus’ idea an’ since Tig’s fucking whipped, she got what she wanted. Oh, an’ what apparently most o’ the girls wanted as well.”
“And I guess some of the guys too.”
“Oh yeah. S’all fucking bathoils and rubber ducks now.”
“Unlike you, who still have your luke-warm shower and carbolic soap like once a week, maybe twice at Christmas.”

It’s bravado and Chibs welcomes it. The way Juice tries to turn his discomfort into a shield of some sort. By God, if it helps, he can try and insult Chibs every waking moment. Better that, then being lost in his own head, hating what he sees.

“Fuck ye too, kid. Cannae let ye have a bath by yerself, though. Ye’ve been in tha’ bed for quite a while an’ if ye fall an’ hit tha’ muppet head o’ yers in the tub, s’it straight off to hospital for ye.”
“You’re helping me then?”
“Of course. I’ll ask Venus to get ye some new sheets too, while we’re at it.”

The lad swallows. He’s not opposed to the idea, he’s always hated feeling dirty, Chibs knows that
and right now, the urge to get clean is stronger than the embarrassment.

“This fucking condom thing… How do I get it off?”
“Warm water. Ye'll need a new one though.”
"Fuck…"

Chibs can’t blame him. Juice wont be able to get it on by himself and it’s not something Chibs enjoys having to help him with, but it was either that, diapers, soaked sheets och screaming for help for everyone to hear. Or a hospital where the staff wouldn’t be able to protect him or even give him the help he needs. Juice seems to have some sense of logic working, because he just sighs again and gives a tiny, almost invisible shrug.

“Lemme guess. Can’t get it on or off without help?”
“No. Least not yet.”
"I hate you."
"I know, lad. I know."
Chapter 97

He’s listening to the dry, almost clinical voice that pretends it’s only about business. He’s good at that, the Scot. And if Juice thinks of him as that right now, it creates that tiny distance he needs in order to not feel worse.

Plastic gloves. Warm water. Unperfumed soap. It doesn’t hurt taking the fucking thing off, at least. As soon as the hands are done, Juice pulls the shorts up, quickly as possible and turns to the side, away from the Scot.

“Gimme some clean shorts.”
“Ye’d probably want to have tha’ bath first.”
"Not nude."

The Scot doesn’t say anything, just goes to the wardrobe. A pair of shorts lands on the bed.

"Get these on. I’ll… wrap up the IV when ye’re done."

Getting the old ones off aint easy. Juice’s legs are stiff and it takes time. The Scot has turned his back on him, waiting. He’s not wearing his cut or hoodie, just a black t-shirt that has seen better days and a pair of worn old jeans, sitting a bit too loose. He’s lost weight too and right now, that just makes Juice more angry. It would’ve been a little easier, being scrawny as a fucking twig, if the Scot had grown himself a beer keg the size of Bobby’s. Sure, the man has aged and no one would call him any close to lean and fit, but Juice still feels so God awful worn down and ugly, in comparison.

“Ye’re done?”

Juice bites back a hiss as he finally pulls the new pair up.

“Done.”

The Scot doesn’t answer, just gets on with his business. Removing the IV tube, plastic wraps around Juice’s hand, a quick checkout at the unvoluntarily self-inflicted scars to make sure they’re not scabbing. Juice looks up at the now empty IV dropper.

“What are you giving me in that?”
"Ciprofloxacin."
“And that’s for…?”
“Urinary tract infection. Another reason why a cath is a shitty idea.”
"Great…"
“T’is something, lad.”

At least it doesn’t hurt too much. And no hospital, or tube shoved up his dick, soaked sheets or fucking diapers. Yeah, it’s something. He should be grateful, because no one and especially not a Son has any duty to aid him at all.

The Scot proceeds by helping him to sit up. His hands are strong, but careful not to squeeze Juice’s bony fingers too much. The world spins a little as Juice gets his legs over the bedside and the Scot quickly presses himself to his side, becoming a support.
“Easy there, kid. I’m too bloody old liftin’ yer bony arse up straight from the floor if ye slip an’ fall.”
“Unlike you, at least I wouldn’t break my hip in the process.”
“Don’ be so sure, arsehole. Alright, arm ‘round ma neck.”
“I don’t…”
“Fucks sake, kid… Just do it, already! Water’s gon纳e get bloody cold. An’ I’ve made sure no one’s running into us.”

Juice wraps himself around the Scot and shuts his eyes, biting hard to stop a groan. He’s stiff as a fucking floor board. It’s humiliating, being carried like a child for something like this. An injury from a job, that’s another thing. A knife fight, a bullet, a bomb going wrong. Juice has no problems with that. This, how ever, is weakness. Helplessness. Uselessness.

He’s keeping his eyes closed, not daring to look up at any potential disgusted eyes still lingering despite the pres’ order of privacy. He can hear doors open, smells coffee and weed – and God, he’d really need some of the green, good stuff right now – before there’s a door opening and a restrained breath from Chibs as Juice is lowered down on the floor. He’s not looking until he can hear the door closing and the lock turning.

“This is…?”
“Aye, it is. Stop gaping.”

Juice just shakes his head.

”Jesus Christ, man… The hell’s this?”
“Venus’ idea of some female comfort. Girls love it, as do most o’ the lads. Not that they’d admit it. S’it warm enough?”

He dips the unwrapped hand in the tub and Juice nods. Hot as hell, just as he likes it. And it smells from some kind of bath oil, mint and something else. Chibs lifts him again, lowering him down slowly in the tub the embarressment fades away for the heat. It makes it’s way back, but only for a moment and then the pores in Juice’s body take a collective sigh of happiness, as if thinking what have we done to deserve this pure bliss?

“Don’ fall asleep, muppet. Sit up straight, aye?”

It’s like in the shower or the small tub-like thing in the cabin, only way warmer and more comfortable. Juice is barely aware of how he’s letting Chibs’s arm take most of his weight before the man arranges him to rest properly against the tub end.

The man he once called brother, who used to call him rat, who he no longer knows what to call – or at least not this strange relationship they seemingly by accident ended up in – washes him carefully with a cloth over his chest, back and arms. Massaging shampoo in his hair. It’s so intimate, too fucking intimate for some reason and it takes all the strength he’s got left not to start crying. The shorts and the fact that Chibs turns his head away for Juice to clean up himself up, is his saving grace, really.

When he’s done, Chibs pulls the tap out and turns the shower on, rinsing properly and it feels good. The smell and stickyness all gone and Juice even turns up against the water, holding his hand out for some soap and then rubbing it all over his stubbled face.

“Need to shave…”
“I have the stuff. Ye’re done?”
“Yeah.”

Chibs turns off the water and hands over a towel, another pair of shorts and an old, large shirt. He almost seems flushed when Juice gives him a questioning look.

“So ye don’ have to get out in the nude or drip water all over the floor. Towels with arms an’ legs, sorta. Ye can change into new ones in yer room.”

Juice just nods then, drying off a bit and then pulling the far too large shirt over his head. He then removes the wet shorts, dries as quickly as possible and gets into the fresh pair. The sense of vulnerability decreases a little with every piece of fabric covering him again. He lets Chibs help him up and back on the floor, drying his feet and calves.

“Can ye sit still with yer head?”
“Yeah.”
“Alright then, should I help ye cleanin’ tha’ stubble up?”
“Sure…”

Juice knows he probably should be worried having another person putting a razor to his face, but whether it’s trust, indifference or simple weariness, he’s just closing his eyes and letting Chibs’ coarse yet gentle hands get rid of his sparse face stubble. When Chibs is done, Juice is exhausted but he manages a small smile.

“Am I fit for a priest visit?”
“Aye. If ye think ye’ll be able to stay awake for more than a minute.”

He’s just about to say that he fucking is and that Chibs should stop fucking mothering him, when he feels a wave of weariness through his body and Juice almost laughs.

“He could… say fucking evening prayers with me…”

The serious Scot smiles too then, stroking a hand over Juice’s still wet hair and giving a small kiss on his forehead. A moment later, Juice is fast asleep.
“Aint tryin’ to keep ye away from’im, Father.”
“I didn’t think you were.”
“Yeah, well… Sorry I kept ye waitin’ here for nothin’.”
“Nothing? I’ve actually had a quite nice afternoon here, Chibs.”

So, he’s finally putting the titles aside. Chibs isn’t sure what to think about it. The last time he went from titles to first name, was with Althea and that’s not a particularly happy memory. They’re handling their so called professional relationship on a manageable level, neither of them bitter or disappointed the personal one ended. In a way, Chibs thinks, they were far too alike to make it. Neither of them ever cried in front of one another.

Quite a few months of not exactly forbidden but extremely unhealthy fruit, were more than enough for both of them to realise they weren’t what they searched for. It was more painful than Chibs cared to admit, not because he wanted Althea or she him, but because apart from the sex, it made him realise how hollow it all was. Like living on bloody Big Mac’s and full fat coke for a months, only filling and refilling, but never actually refueling on the things he needed. Chibs is fairly certain the thing he craves isn’t the body and blood of Christ either.

He sits down on the bench too. The priest is smoking, sipping on his probably refilled cup and he nods at the playground.

“Lot of you have kids?”

Chibs blows out a slow cloud of smoke. If he closes his eyes, he can almost see them: Abel and Thomas, Kenny and Ellie. Jax’s and Opie’s kids, laughing and running around. Gemma watching over them, proud of her little pack of mini crows… Donna and Tara trying to find out where their respective marriages ended and the patch began. When the men they’d married were husbands and fathers, and when they were brothers, killers and just acres on the great, always spinning wheel of Samcro.

He tries not to think too much about it, because it always makes him feel low.

“Aye. It does…”

“Some of us.”

“You?”

”A daughter. Kerrianne. She’s visiting now, actually.”

”She’s back in… Scotland, otherwise?”

”Actually, she’s never been to Scotland. Her mother an’ I met in Dublin, many years ago. She’s at uni now.”

”Time flies.”

The priest smiles and Chibs just nods, stumping out the fag.

”Aye. It does…”

”It’s an impressive thing. What you’re doing for Juan.”

”Oh yeah? I encouraged him to kill himself. How’s tha’ for compassion?”

”We all do things we regret.”

”An’ just how many o’ those things ye regret, could’ve cost someone’s life, Father? I’m a selfish bastard, simple as that. No need to sugarcoat shite.”
“Is this a confession, my son?”
“I haven’t been to confession since the Cause.”
“You mean since IRA?”

Chibs snickers.

“Sure ye don’ want me to contact Belfast on yer behalf, Father?”
“An Englishman accepted by the Irish Kings? They must be desperate. A tempting offer, Chibs, but
there are children of God right here that need me far more than some outdated terrorist.”
“Now ye sound like Venus.”
“The Allmother…”
“The hell are ye talking about?”
”Norse mythology. The old heathen gods, Odin they called the king of gods and the Allfather. Miss
Van Dam strikes me as someone acting like the mother of you all, but I’m not sure Virgin Mary is
really her image…”
“Ye’d be surprised at how full of grace tha’ woman is, Father.”
“Well, in this short time, I’ve learned you’re running one surprising club, pres.”
“And ye’re a strange kind o’ clerk.”

The priest just hums at that. He’s a patient man, Chibs has realised, and patient men are often the
most dangerous. Chibs should know, he’s after all a pretty dangerous man himself.

“You do realise I’ve been covering up a bit for both of you, since you took off?”
“Cops don’t have anything better to do than running after a mental patient skippin’ parole meetings?
Thought Jarry cleared’im of those until he’s better.”
“Yes, but she’s not been particularly pleased at how hard it is to get a chat with you.”
“The hell’s that supposed to mean? She’s got my number, she coulda’ just called.”
“I think she wanted a meeting. Face to face.”
“Ye’re runnin’ errands for her now, aye?”
“I’m here for Juan.”
“Think he’s lookin’ forward to see ye. Just… too tired.”

Not a lie, not really. Chibs is fairly sure seeing the priest would be good for Juice, if only the shame
didn’t get such a paralyzing hold on him.

“And how about you? How are you holding up?”
“Thought tha’ was pretty obvious.”
“Come on, Filip, quit the bullshit. We both know everyone needs a good cry every now and then. I
imagine it’s been a while since you had a moment to catch your breath.”
“If I needed a shrink, I’d see one.”
“Understanding your need for a breather hardly requires a degree. Or a priest collar. You do look
tired, Filip.”
“Nothing I cannae handle.”

The priest laughs and shakes his head, lighting a fag of his own. Chibs frowns.

“What’s so funny?”

The man just keeps laughing, although quiet.

“You’re trying to save a man you thought you hated, without really knowing what you’re doing or
what’s realistic. You’re ready to go against your club, or at least persuade your brothers to aid you
for some kind of noble cause, that’s just a cover-up for the fact that you never stopped loving a man you claimed to want dead.”

Chibs is speechless for a moment, just looking away while sucking on the fag. He then makes an angry little sigh.

“Aren’t ye supposed to preach ‘bout not fucking with a man as with a woman an’ shite like tha’, ‘sted o’ soundin’ like ye encourage it?”

“Is it even possible to lie with a man as with a woman? Always found that passage a bit strange considering the bodily differences.”

Now Chibs laughs.

“Lemme guess: ye’re not aspirin’ for a Vatican promotion, Father?”

“I like Stockton. Charming too, actually. It’s got more to it than meets the eye.”

The man gives his mild, disarming smile again and Chibs quietly has to agree.
He can’t recall ever having been looked after like this. It’s as if every little detail is of outmost importance, nothing’s too small to be bypassed. An old alarm clock has been placed on the bedside table, along with a small whiteboard, a calendar and a standing clipboard. Every morning when Chibs hands him the first load of meds, the man crosses over the previous day with a pen, writes down some time-stamps on the whiteboard and attaches a list with more details regarding meds, mealtimes and if there’s anything happening that differs from just sleeping, washing up and eating. The Scot then proceeds to check his temperature, blood pressure and pulse, removing the empty IV and wrap the needle in plastic.

His bedsheets are changed every morning and the room properly aired out while he’s doing – or trying to do – his morning routine. He can just about tolerate having that uridome thing removed and put on, but Chibs isn’t allowed to wash him again. Instead, Juice insists on sitting in the tub in what is referred to as the ”chicks bath” and do it himself, even if the man stays on the other side of shower curtain. Having that small piece of privacy, slowly decreasing the amount of time showing himself at his most vulnerable, means a lot. It’s also a continuing bliss, being able to actually smell fresh and clean again, using good fucking products.

He’s still too unsteady to walk by himself and has to ungo the still embarrassing minutes of having the uridome rolled on and off, but then Juice closes his eyes and thinks of diapers, pee soaked sheets and laying on bedpans, all the things that would be a worse alternative than a couple of minutes with Chibs’ plastic glove clad hands squeezing it in place. At least Juice isn’t getting hard and Chibs is quick and efficient, silently helping him into a pair of shorts before leaving him on the floor in private, with all the things he needs close.

Juice wants it like that. On a chair he’s still a bit too unsteady and by sitting on the floor with the wall as a support, he’s able to moisturize a bit and put some pants and a tanktop on without help. It exhausts him, yes, but it’s so worth it, even if the fucking pee bag strap around his leg itches like hell. Once he’s done, he accepts Chibs’ help to get on his feet and walk with slow and small steps, supported by the mans’ steady frame, back to bed and the breakfast tray consisting of a smoothie, iron and vitamine pills, a cup of coffee for Chibs and the single flower in a vase that Venus always decorates it with.

The fifteen or twenty minutes when Chibs has his black gold and Juice carefully sips on the homemade smoothie, swallowing the last load of pills before lunch, is one of the few moments during the day that makes the weakness bearable. When he’s clean and fresh and has some fucking pants on. Chibs usually doesn’t talk much over his coffee, neither of them are morning people after all, and they just sip on their respective beverages while Dyna is munching on her kibble from a bowl on the floor. It’s kinda peaceful, or at least something close to it. Peace isn’t a normal part of Juice’s life, it never has.

He can’t shave or sit by the sink long enough to brush his teeth, but he can live with Chibs’ taking a razor to his face and holding up one of those stainless steel basins for him to spit in. He can live with it, because he’ll soon be sleeping again once the weariness from the morning’s efforts starts cooperate with the sedatives and painkillers. Laying back down, clean, dry and not feeling sick, knowing he’s having some hours of sleep ahead of him where he’s not having to swallow pills or being turned or touched is, in that moment, an immeasurable reward.

As the days pass, Juice slowly realises that a battle against shame and despise isn’t always fought
from within. There are moments throughout the day, when he’s about to crumble from it, when the voices in his head are too loud for any care, words or meds to get through. In those moments, he’s not co-operative at all, just a bundle of bony self-hatred who can’t be trusted on his own. The clawing isn’t even conscious, it just happens and doesn’t cause too much real damage, but it’s a habit that makes Chibs nervous and he regularly threatens with wrapping Juice’s entire arms in plaster or cuff him if it doesn’t stop. It doesn’t seem like he’s near to make a reality of the threats, but Juice still tries to stop. The thought of itching plasters is not a pleasant one and mostly it’s enough to be reminded of it and the impulse dies off. The shame wont decrease from it thought, only make it worse by adding the want to scratch to it.

It’s almost comical, Juice thinks, how his inner chaos seems to get worse as his body is healing. He isn’t capable of not taking any comfort or pleasure in the care though, simply because his body has been screaming for it for such a long time. This isn’t a prison bunk, a lumpy couch or a hard motel mattress his muscles are resting on. The room isn’t too cold or hot, the air is fresh and he’s not startled by sounds or voices from the other side of the door anymore. Everything is just… too perfect for his mind to deal with. Too big a contrast, maybe.

Another thing that belongs to the small box of bearable, almost nice moments of the day, is the some-kind-of physical therapy Chibs does with him every afternoon after his nap. Juice’s mobility, especially on heavy meds, is completely fucked up and his joints and muscles are screaming of happiness from laying on a fucking yoga mat on the floor and just being stretched out a bit. Everytime Chibs is rolling him onto his stomach and very carefully presses on the back, Juice actually smiles as his spine is popped back in it’s right place. Chibs takes time to stretch his legs and arms too, as well as his sore neck. When he’s done, it’s time for another nutritional drink and some sitting on the bed, just to change the angle and place of pressure.

In a way, it feels unreal. Juice Ortiz, a fucking coward rat and nazi owned prison bitch, is being cared for by the very club he once betrayed, treated like he was one of their own. No, not quite. Juice really can’t remember anyone being fussed over like this in the clubhouse, apart from babies and toddlers. He’s not sure what it says about Samcro that this is happening. Even if he’d not been a rat, but a brother and a valued one, it still would be fucking strange. Gemma would’ve hated it and Jax despised it. How Tig’s okay with it, is completely beyond Juice and one afternoon when Chibs is done with the whole spine popping routine and Juice is practising his balance while sitting on the bedside, he can’t help but point it out.

“S’not Samcro style, you know. All this… caring shit.”

Chibs frowns and Juice is about to add that he’s not complaining, when the Scot makes a small laugh.

“Aye, ye’re right, it’s not. Guess things are actually changing this time… Always though it would be Jax who…”

He’s stopping himself and Juice isn’t sure if it’s because of him or the Scot’s own visibly painful memory of a man he loved and probably still loves, since the heart isn’t and never will be, a reasonable thing. And as with Tully, Juice’s own fucked up heart has not kicked the now dead Son out either. It’s actually filled with dead people who’s own hearts long since stopped beating, not all of them for something good.

Jax was the one who was supposed to, not save but lead them all from something acceptable to something good. And they all, apart from Clay and Gemma, probably really believed him, or at least had more faith than doubts in him. Thinking of Jax, also makes Juice think of those of his former
brothers that are still alive and he takes a deep breath.

“"The others… what are they saying about all this?"
“"They’re onboard."

Juice snorts.

""Yeah, but in return for what? I know them too, Chibs, and there’s no way in hell Happy or Rat would accept this unless you’re giving them really, really good reasons.”

“No, they wouldn’t.”

Chibs sighs and takes Juice’s hand.

“"There’ll be an… investigation, sorta. Or, there is, already.”
"Investigation?"
”Aye, an’ it’ll take some time. Have to talk to a lot of people, getting a clear picture of… what happened since ye went inside.”

Juice feels his stomach almost flipping over, but he manages to stay still and take some deep breaths. Chibs looks worried again and strokes his hair.

“"Listen, lad… Don’ worry ‘bout all tha’ now, alright? Just focus on gettin’ back on yer feet, aye?”
"You’re gonna tell them… Talk to Gaines again and… Jesus…”

If shame was a disease, it would be spreading right now, like a plague content with infecting just one body and every little cell in it. The feeling is so vivid, it’s almost physical enough to touch. The meds may keep the panic attack away, but it doesn’t stop the shame, this feeling of being a poisonous pile of crap, ruining everything good close to him just by existing.

Sons don’t rat on their brothers. Sons don’t lie and steal from them. Sons don’t fail to pay for their sins. Sons don’t become a nazi’s prison bitch.

Sons don’t get repeatedly raped by a shitty prison guard high on power. Sons resist and pay back in blood. They don’t save a sad piece of brison bitch shit who wasn’t man enough to stand up for himself.

Somewhere through the thick wave of shame and nausea, Juice can hear Chibs’ calm voice speaking, but the words are meaningless to him. He can’t even make anything of them, they’re just sounds floating around in the mixture of anxiety that’s too affected from the meds to break out in an actual panic attack. It’s not until he unknowingly starts scratching himself that he comes back enough to hear Chibs’ voice.

“No, lovey, don’ do tha’ to yerself… Ye’ve been so good not doin’ tha’, s’almost healed. C’mere, my lil’ one…”

There’s such a gentleness, such kindness in all of it. The words, the voice, the touches and Juice wants to hate it, because it makes him feel helpless like a child or wounded animal, but Chibs’ patience these days is fucking overcompensating for the past and in the long run, Juice isn’t strong enough to resist it.

Chibs holds him in his arms, firm and still on the bedside and nothing Juice says seems to throw him off balance. Juice tries all he can, even says he wishes he’d been successful with the chain, hoping it
will make the man yell or at least bark at him. Call him a pathetic little shite who’s not man enough to stand for anything, just a spineless scumbag who feels sorry for himself like a whining coward crawling back for forgiveness.

But the Scot remains silent, as if dealing with a railing loon on crank and simply sitting it out, blind and deaf to the madness and self-pity. Finally, when Juice is too tired from the outburst to even repeat himself and just pants and shudders, Chibs takes his face between his palms, using his thumbs to wipe off some tears Juice didn’t even feel were there. The man’s pepper dark eyes are weary and sad, but firm and then he bends to give Juice a kiss on the hair before turning to look at him again.

“Ye’re done ravin’ shite ‘bout yerself yet, kid?”

Juice doesn’t answer, just opens his mouth like a fish and then shuts it. Chibs smiles and strokes his hair again.

“Thanks, lad. Was two seconds ‘way from givin’ ye another spanking an’ I really don’ have time hidin’ from Venus for a week, so please, just shut yer mouth now, unless ye plan on doin’ something useful with it.”

The moment he says it, Juice can see Chibs realising how absolutely wrong that came out, but before the Scot can start over and make a completely unnecessary explanation, Juice places a thin hand on his neck and pulls him in for a kiss.
“Wanna rent a movie or something after dinner?”
“Rent a movie? Da, ye sound ancient…”
“Oh aye?”

Chibs glares at his young daughter over the bowl of spaghetti bolognese.

“Tha’ must mean I’m too old to take ma lass out for a shopping spree in San Fran too. Guess I’ll have to spend those hours just going through ma stack o’ papers, not straining my ancient knees an’ wallet with walking around stores.”

Tig snickers as he sees the wild look on Kerrianne’s face.

“Honor thy father, kid, it pays off. Could you pass the salt, baby?”

Venus hands him the salt and then smiles at Chibs’ wayward daughter.

“Oh, then he simply must take you to Ambience. They have the most wonderful collection to very reasonable prices.”
“You call a seven hundred dollar black dress reasonable?”

Tig has folded his arms and Chibs chokes on his spaghetti. Venus throws a disappointed look at her old man.

”That was Armani, dear, not Ambience and you told me I was worth it and looked stunning.”

Now it’s Chibs’ turn to grin at his brother who is just about as uninterested in fashion as he, yet still loves to spend money on his old lady. Venus pours some more wine into her glass.

“I’ll help you look up all the best stores, Kerrianne, and to prevent your father from having a stroke in the middle of a female crowd of vicious bargain hunters, I’ll even draw you a map with detours.”

Tig has a curious gaze in his usually so undecipherable eyes as he looks at Venus.

“I thought you went to special shops, you know… for… larger ladies.”
“Sweetheart, you can say trans people. And yes, I do have an absolutely lovely tailor, who’s changing all those pretty dresses for me. And speaking of that, you haven’t forgotten about your girl’s 29th birthday, right?”

Now the VP looks like he’s about to panic and ask for a transfer because he sucks at knowing what date it is and his sence of time is worse than Happy’s sence for tact. Kerrianne, how ever, seems to be enjoying herself. Spending a couple of days in the garage with Quinn and the prospects has left her slightly less pouting and also taught her a thing or two about bikes. Chibs feels a bit guilty though, for spending so much time with Juice, but Kerrianne did show up in a bad time, so… And it’s not that he doesn’t want to indulge his lass when he’s got the chance, it’s just…

Tig gives his old lady a quick peck on her cheek.

“You know I never forget your 29th birthdays, baby.”
Now Kerrianne actually giggles and before it gets too awkward for poor Tig, Chibs quickly takes over.

“So, we’ll go shopping once we’re clear to get off lockdown, an’ watch a movie tonight. Tha’ sounds good, Kerri?”
“Wha’ kinda movies ye like then?”

Chibs throws out his hands.

”Ye pick something, sweetheart. As long as there’s no musical shite or Nicolas Cage, Tom Cruise or Hugh Grant in it.”
“What about Heath Ledger an’ Jake Gyllenhaal?”
”Who?”

Kerrianne looks at Venus and the man who knows she’s a woman gives one of her secretive smiles, receiving one herself from Chibs’ wayward daughter.

“Not a musical, or Nicolas Cage or Tom Cruise or Hugh Grant, da. Promise.”

Chibs shrugs and returns to his spaghetti.

”We’ll watch that one, then. Aye?”
“Aye. Ye think Juice will join us?”
”Could ask, but I wouldn’t count on it. He’s quite tired.”

Juice is too weak to have his nutritional drinks at the table and Chibs is pretty sure the lad prefers not to put himself on display right now. Kerrianne bites her lip.

“I’d like to meet him. I mean, if he’s up to it.”
“I’ll ask. An’ he’s not goin’ anywhere for a while, so there’s time for tha’ too.”

Is this what normal fathers do? Having movie nights and shopping days with their daughters? Chibs doesn’t know, hell, he barely knows what a normal mother does. He can’t for his life picture Fiona walking around boutiques and look at shoes and skirts with Kerrianne, or alone for that matter.

And speaking of that, the boys have to assemble tomorrow, discussing the partial lockdown. It’s been calm and no movement from Mount Whitey, and the boys are all eager to get back to normal, having parties again. And Chibs really needs to stop thinking about kissing Juice.
"No, Chibbie."
"Ye’re not intrudin’, ye know."
"How often have you seen Kerrianne without explosives involved?"
"Puttin’ it like tha’, then…"

Chibs makes a slightly sad little shrug and Juice smiles, taking his hand.

“It’s not you who’re a shitty dad, Chibs. It’s the IRA that’s a shitty employer.”

Chibs laughs.

"Aye, one could say tha’. Christ, I barely know her…”
"What’s her eyecolor?"
"Brown.”
"What’s her favourite food?"
"Chinese.”
"When’s her birthday?"
"August 2nd.”
"When did she take her first steps?"
"May 18th 1997, Jesus, what’s this? A bloody interrogation?"

Juice rubs a thumb over Chibs’ knuckles.

"Had you left her if Jimmy hadn’t banned you from Ireland?"
"Of course not.”
"Not even if you’d split with Fiona?”
"Never.”

The man looks positively offended and Juice gives his hand a reassuring squeeze.

"You’re done raving shite about yourself then, idiot?”

When Chibs just snorts at that, although not talking back, Juice closes his eyes, sighing a bit. He’s still really tired.

“I never met my old man, my mom is dead and my stepdad was an asshole. ’S been more than ten years since I spoke to Bianca.”
"Yer sister?”
"Yeah. So… trust me, Chibbie, being forced to leave your family by a club or organization, is pretty fucking far from being kicked out…”

He’s talking about his blood family, but it could just as well be about his chosen one. He’s never done well on his own, but he’s failed to be with others as well and people have suffered, even died because of him. Juice swallows.

“You really should spend some time alone with your kid, Chibbie. Seriously, man… I’m doing just fine on my own tonight and I’m pretty sure Venus will run in and outta here at least twice an hour to check on me, whether I need it or not. Buy some popcorn and beers and just… be a dad for a few
hours, okay? Not a pres, not a biker, not my fucking nurse.”

Juice lets out a small laughter and the Scot leans closer, almost resting his chin on the pillow, a few inches away. A strain of hair has slipped off from the neck and Juice lifts a hand, tucking it behind Chibs’ ear.

“Am too tired to watch a movie anyways… She’s here because she wants to spend time with you.” “Takin’ her shopping tomorrow…”

Another giggle, it just comes and Juice shakes his head.

“Lemme guess? Not gas, booze or groceries?” “More like designers clothes…”

Now he’s laughing for real, grimazing a bit from the ache it causes. Chibs frowns at him, but it’s the good kind of frown. The laughing is a sign of improvement and even if it’s a slow progress, at least it’s a steady one. It’s been a very long time since Juice laughed for a nice reason without layers of self-hatred and sadness embeded in it.

The man who’s life he so weirdly came back into as more than a painful memory, makes his own self-ironic smirk.

“Yeah, yeah… Just laugh at me, lad. When ye’re done, maybe ye could lemme know if ye need something while I’m at it?”

Juice stops laughing and that well-known feeling of worthlessness is back. The one that’s been there since he was a kid and learned that Brian Parks didn’t like greedy kids. Admitting to want something, usually meant a decreased chance of getting it. Or, if you already had it, the risk of having it taken away. Juice didn’t deserve nice things anyway and especially not now. Denying himself comfort for more than two years now, it’s still a very new feeling, having others caring like this.

“I don’t really need anything, man. I mean… you’re already doing so much for me.”

But Chibs just waves it off, like an irritating bug.

“Ye sure as hell need some clothes tha’ wont fall off ye. I’ll find ye a measure tape so ye can gimme yer sizes an’ if they still don’ fit, I’ll ask Brooke to change’em for ye.” “Brooke?”

“Brooke Putner, Rat’s old lady. The one who took a wrench to Tig’s bike, ye remember?” “Vaguely.” “Well, anyway, she’s got a sewing machine and she’s pretty good with it. And unless ye’ve planned on just staying in bed, show off yer undies or walking around lookin’ like some Wu-Tang teen fan, yer pathetic wardrobe needs an update.”

Juice just stares at the man.

“Are you saying that the Samcro pres, who’s used the same old shirt for like a decade now, just critizised my wardrobe and offered to go fucking clothes shopping for me…?” “Aye, don’ get all weird about it, lad. Venus fixed some for ye, if ye’ve noticed, but those cheap ass rags are about to fall apart.” “You don’t have to buy things for me, Chibbie.”
“No, but I do need to protect the clubhouse from ye walkin’ around, looking like some skinny hobo.”
“Not doing much walking right now though. Seriously, man, I…”
”Stop it, lad.”

Chibs is still frowning and Juice immediately shuts up as he’s always done when hearing the ”IRA Filip” behind the words. He starts fidgeting with the duvet, automatically lowering his head for the commanding tone. He doesn’t mean to come off as ungrateful or rude, but…

"Look at me, Juicy."

The voice is very calm and the hand now taking his own, holding it to stop the restlessness, feels firm and warm. Juice looks up and into the brown eyes. Chibs doesn’t smile, but the frown is gone and he doesn’t seem too annoyed.

“Listen, muppet… It’s some bloody pants, not branded clothing. Ye’d prefer braces and elastics?”

Now Juice laughs again, still ashamed and worried, but it’s really not that easy to protest against reason when he’s this weak and tired, especially not Chibs’ form of it. Juice bites his lip.

“Save the receipts, alright?”
”Why?”
”’Cause I wanna pay you back.”
”Don’ think ’bout tha’ now.”
”It’s important to me, Chibs…”

He swallows.

”No matter how you see it, I’m depending on you for about everything right now. I wanna… I need to feel I’m not gonna remain a charity case forever.”
“But I…”
“Please? Just save’em for me, okay?”

Chibs looks like he’s about to protest but then he simply nods.

“Alright, kiddo… If it’s so fucking important…”
“It is.”

Every bit of independence counts. Every little grain of it must be seen as a victory, even if it seems meaningless. And Juice knows, as does Chibs, that it’s way easier to pay back a shitload of money or mend some clothes, than repairing a broken trust.
“What’s wrong with ye, lass?”
“What do ye mean?”
“Well, for a start… ye were bawling for about half the movie last night.”
“I like cryin’ from movies. Jus’ because ye think it’s… I donnae, unmanly or something, doesn’t mean it’s wrong.”

Chibs just snorts and parks the car. He’s never really liked cars, they just make him think of bombs and being stuck in long ass traffic lines. Bikes are freedom, cars just cages on wheels, but when it comes to his daughter, Chibs isn’t compromising with security. He’s not wearing his cut today and although his scars are prominent, he doubts the stores Kerrianne has in mind, are typical nazi – or Mayan – whereabouts. He’s still wearing a stupid marine shirt covering the ink, a ridiculous 49ers cap and has put his large rings in his chest pocket. The things he does for his little girl…

Since no one leaves the clubhouse without an escort, they have jumpy Ricky in tow, seemingly happy for a day away from bikes and cars. Not that Chibs would let anything happen to Kerrianne, but club rules are club rules and Ricky may still be a prospect, but he’s quicker than a cat and fighting spirit like an angry street dog. Also, despite having had T.O. in for a few years already, many people still aren’t used to the idea of black Sons, meaning if Chibs and Kerri, God forbid, have a tail, the bastard most likely wont recognize the skinny and restless black man in jeans and sneakers. Ricky has always preferred the garage, never really been one to spend much time socializing with anyone. To no one’s surprise, he’s getting really well along with Happy.

“So… where are we goin’?”
“Noe Valley, of course.”
“Aye, but where exactly?”
”3979 24th Street. Don worry, da, I have Google maps.”

Chibs forces a shudder away, he’s really not a big fan of crowds, even if this one mainly seems to consist of latte sipping, chatting and laughing women with loads of shopping bags, despite the rather early hour. Chibs hates to admit it, but leaving Juice this morning was hard. It’s ridiculous, really. The lad has got Venus within earshot and both Tig and Happy keeping an extra eye on things. No one enters or leaves the club house, not even to the garage or yard, without their permission and watch.

“Here it is!”

She sounds happy, excited, almost like the small lass he used to carry around on his shoulders and take for ice cream every Sunday in another life. Before things turned to shite.

Shopping with Kerrianne turns out to be a lot more fun than Chibs is ready to admit. It’s digging deep holes in his wallet as well, but he only complains out of habit, and to keep up some sort of image of parental responsibility. What a joke. He’s probably spent at least ten times the amount of money on booze, explosives, whores and bike parts the last five years than he’s spent on clothes for his entire life. He’s the last person on Earth to give a lass in her twenties lectures about money or clothes, not to mention responsibility.
When Kerrianne has enough bags to last for a decade and Chibs is absolutely certain that Fiona will give him a lecture on the dangers of spoiling your child, they finally take a break at one of them coffee shops Chibs figures Juice probably would like.

And he really shouldn’t think so damn much about him right now. A daughter never should come second to a… well, whatever the fuck Juice is to him. As he starts on his black coffee and giant cinnamoroll while Kerrianne is sipping on a moccachino with a happy smile, Chibs just knows she’s about to tease him again.

“What now, love?”
“Ye realise this is the first time we’ve actually done something without maw in like… fifteen years?”
“Aye, an’ she’ll have my arse for this.”
“Sorry…”

Chibs smiles at her.

“T’im not.”
“I know I showed up at a bad time…”
“Don’ think ’bout tha’ now, lass. I’m the one who’s bad at timing. Should’ve made time far earlier.”
“So… ye’re not mad anymore?”
“No, jus’ a wee bit worried ’bout what’s goin’ on between ye an’ yer maw.”

Kerrianne puts down her cup and gives a little shrug.

“T’is really not just ’bout her, da. T’is ’bout, ye know…”
"’Ye bein’ a lesbian?”

She’s not having that previous, almost irritated and confident look as when she told him. She’s just looking a bit… hopeless. Lost in a way and she looks out the window.

“I haven’t told her. She’s… Ye know how she is, da. Always the cause, always so fucking… serious ’bout everything.”
“Not without reason.”
“Aye, but even Maureen knows how to bloody smile every once in a while. Ever since Jimmy… I thought it would be different, but everytime I get back to Belfast, maw’s just… “
“Getting’ in yer face ’bout everything an’ yellin’ for nothing, aye?”
“Pretty much. I… I know it sounds stupid, but I don’ think she likes it when I come home.”
“Oh, Kerri…”
“She’s always busy, da, I don’ even know why she wants me to visit. I’m actually really worried she’s gonnae get all riled up if I tell her I’m into girls.”

And she doesn’t have anyone close at uni either… Well, Chibs finally gets a least a small piece of reason behind this seemingly completely irrational decision. He sighs.

“Darlin’, why didn’t ye just call me?”
“Cause I know ye’d called maw.”
“She ain’t gonnae have a problem with ye diggin’ chicks, sweetheart.”
“Not until I find a girlfriend who isn’t Irish or worse, isn’t Catholic, she wont.”

She goes silent for a moment and then it hits Chibs.
“Ye found yerself a hun?”*
"From Ards…"
"Jesus…"
"Her name’s Hannah and her da’s a Presbyterian minister."

Chibs just stares at her and she bites her lip.

“So, uhm… I used Brokeback Mountain as a… kind of warm-up…”
“Warm-up?”
“Alright, I needed a good cry too… Figured I could use some help. So, now ye know wha’s wrong with me, I guess.”

Chibs shakes his head, taking his strong, smart, young and sometimes so stupid daughter’s hand. He gives it a reassuring squeeze and then pulls himself together, smiling at her while forcing his worries away - and being grateful Ricky is keeping himself out of earshot.

“The only thing wrong with ye, is yer inability to trust me to keep a secret from yer maw. Now… tell yer old da ‘bout this Hannah lass an’ her hun* father… I can get confused later…”

Chapter End Notes

*degratory term for protestants, often used in Northern Ireland
"How are you feeling?"
"Like a pet projekt. Sorry…"

Ungratefulness. He can’t seem to stop it and he grimazes as he sits up. Feeling this weak is something Juice thinks he’ll never get used to. Pain is one thing, but dragging his body around like it’s some kind of heavy load is awful. He looks at the man by his bed.

“How did you get passed the watchdogs?”
“Apparantly, I’m on Mr. Telford’s good list.”

Juice smirks.

“Try and stay on it. Being on his bad list isn’t fun in the least.”
“I imagine not.”
“Why are you here, padre?”
”I wanted to see how you’re doing.”
“Chibs is a trained medic, Samcro has money and Venus makes real good smoothies. I’m babied like a royal retard.”
“You do look a lot better, but too much contrasts can be exhausting. Not that I need to tell you that.”
“No, you don’t.”

He’s not being rude on purpose. It’s just that despite being so well looked after, he’s still anxious when Chibs isn’t around. It took a lot to hide it before the man left this morning.

“You’ve been through a lot, Juan. You deserve some good rest and help.”
”Three years ago I deserved a bullet. Quite a difference from this.”
”Sometimes the contrasts are actually harder to handle, than a constant hell.”

Juice shakes his head.

“Sure you’re a real priest, padre? Seems to me like you’re quite big on heresy.”
“The God I believe in was found guilty of that Himself.”
“So you’re comparing yourself to Jesus now?”
“No, He’s the one comparing Himself to us.”
“You went to like… Oxford, or something? You sound like a fucking professor.”
“And you sound like you’re way more capable of far more things than you’re giving yourself credit for.”
“All I’m capable of, as I can see, is to swallow pills and let Chibs and Venus pamper me.”
“Accepting help when you need it, isn’t weakness. Isn’t that how we’re getting back on our feet?”

Always an answer to fucking everthing. Juice bites his lip.

”Feels like I’m… I don’t know… using the club without giving anything back. I should get bullets, padre, not some kind of medical spa treatment.”
“Because you don’t think you deserve what… nice things being done for you?”

Juice snickers at the priest’s naive kindness.
"Let's not kid ourselves, padre. I'm a criminal and you know it. I'm pretty sure you've seen at least some of my records. Last time I checked, doing time isn't seen as an accomplishment and I'm not where I am today for filching apples."

"Neither am I."

"Aren't we supposed to reap what we sow?"

The Reaper is always hungry. No matter how much He swallows down, there's only bones under the cloak. Sons Of Anarchy's patron saint is patient and will make sure He's there to reap every little straw you're offering along with all things you'd hoped to keep for yourself. The priest leans on his knees, hands folded.

"I leave the judgement to God, Juice. He's far more forgiving than I am."

"It's not your forgiveness I need, padre."

"No, you need your club's and from what I can see, it certainly looks like it's giving it."

"Chibs convincing them to help me, aint the same as forgiveness, trust me."

"Maybe not, but it's certainly not condemnation either."

"This is Samcro, padre. Not Jesus. And I've not been anything near an innocent little lamb since I was nine."

"You're determined to judge yourself, aren't you, Juice?"

"I'm determined to make amends."

He bites his lip, it's like a nervous tic and his hands start fidgeting with the sheet again. His hands, once strong, capable... Tools he could trust. They also stole the coke, pressed the pillow and tied the noose.

"You have no idea, how bad I failed them, padre. How I failed him. His eyes... Jesus, his eyes when I thought he'd... I don't know how I could've been so stupid as to think he'd forgive me, and a second later, he told me to eat my gun."

It's hard, harder than he thought to talk about it and he keeps his eyes fixed on his bony, nervous fingers.

"I have so much to make up for and so much that just can't be forgiven. Maybe your Jesus will, but..."

"He's not Samcro."

"And neither am I. Not anymore."

The priest sighs, shaking his head.

"Juan... What ever made you hate yourself so much, my son?"
His feet are aching, his brain is about to shut down from all the noises and views and his wallet is a lot lighter, but he’s got a much happier lass opening the trunk and Chibs feels… well, lighter despite everything. Rat and Happy generously helps Kerrianne with the bags and she’s soon off with Venus, who’s excited about her purchases. In Chibs’ own black bag there’s more, but not for show and he walks towards his room when he stumbles upon Tig.

“You’re alive, pres?”
“ Barely. Yer old lady’s idea of reasonable prices, is something I wannae have a word with her about.”
“As long as you’re not disrespectful.”

Chibs snorts but drops the subject. Tig is so damn pussy whipped and four years on, he’s still sensitive about any criticism against Venus. Fortunately, she’s so well liked among both members and club associates, that’s very rarely an issue.

“Need a word, Tig.”
“Sure.”

They walk into Tig’s room and Chibs closes the door behind them.

“Everything good here?”
“Yeah.”
“And Juice?”
“The priest was with him but he’s asleep now.”
“Juice or the priest?”
“Juice. The priest left a while ago. Told me to tell you to call him when you have time.”
“Okay. Anythin’ else?”
“Nah, everything’s good. No panic shite and no Hitler hicks visiting. Hap’s really disappointed. Oiled his little tool box for nothing.”
“Ever the boy scout… Always ready.”
“You know it. Juice is kinda huffy, though.”
“Why?”

Tig shrugs and sits down on his bed.

“Guess repeated rapes and anorexia aren’t as hilarious as they sound.”

Had it been anyone but Tig naming Juice’s wounds so casually, Chibs would’ve decked him on spot.

“He’s not bloody anorexic, Tig.”
“Whatever, you’re the medic.”
“How are the boys takin’ all this?”

The VP raises his eyebrows.

“Aint got nothing to worry about, Chibs. We have your back, you know. Yours and his.”
Chibs sighs.

“Startin’ to think I’m turning into...”

“You’re not!”

Tig cuts him off, nailing him with his gaze.

”Don’t fucking dare compare yourself to Jax.”

“I’m not putting the club first…”

“You are.”

Chibs is confused and Tig gives him an annoyed look.

“We can’t make a final vote about Juice before we know the hole truth. That’s the deal, that’s how Samcro works, how we all decided to run shit after Jax. I don’t always like it and sometimes it’s a fucking waste of time and money, but I aint going back to his way. Or Clay’s. Besides, if John had been here, he’d supported you.”

“If John had still been here, we’d never ended up in this shite to begin with.”

“So why fucking bring it back?”

He should have an answer to that, but he hasn’t. So many things that were givens a few months back, have been remodeled or simply crumbled and Chibs knows, although he’s not gonna form the notion into actual words, that had John been holding the gavel instead of Clay or Jax, the man who’s healing in the dorm, probably never would’ve broken in the first place. Not this badly.

“Look, Chibs… we all know.”

“Know what?”

“So about you and Juice.”

Chibs feels his hackles raising and his usually so calm heart speeding up.

“Wha’ d’ye mean?”

“Your thing, whatever it is. From where the rest of us are standing, it’s pretty fucking obvious by now. Jesus Christ, even Happy accepts it. I’m the first to admit Rat and Quinn don’t understand these kind of things unless you corner them with it, but come on, pres, give the others some credit.”

This isn’t how it’s supposed to be. No, no it can’t be like this. It’s too early, too much and… Chibs swallows. He has to sit down too and he grabs the chair Tig uses as a dumping spot for clothes.

“Wha’ d’ye want me to do about it?”

"Do? Well, if I were you, I’d share more details about that tight little ass with me, but I guess there’s not much to grab at the moment. If I was Rat, I’d cry for momma. Jax would’ve turned in his grave, Clay throw up and I guess Gemma would make her famous smirk and pretend she already knew.”

“But ye’re not.”

“Nah, so I’m just gonna tell you it’s all good, brother. A bit weird, probably, but you know me. My idea of weird is like Happy’s idea of normal. Not for the faint hearted. You really think I’d let you save that idiot if I wasn’t sure about your three years long fucking pining? Nah, man… Keep the little idiot here, we’ll help him get on his feet as promised.”

Chibs shakes his head.

“I’m not asking that of ye.”
“I already told you, Chibs. When you officially accepted Venus… I’m not sure how long I could’ve kept her partly hidden, brother.”
“S’not the same thing.”
“Juice’s transgression is one thing, you suddenly wanting dick is another. The latter isn’t a problem for anyone, really.”
“Aren’t ye worried my loyalty will be compromised?”
“No.”

Tig scratches his hair.

"I get how you’re thinking, Chibs. We all trusted Juice and still he ratted on us. We trusted Clay and all he cared about was money. Trusted Jax and... well, see where that got us. I’ve been thinking about this a lot, you know... Clay tasked me with killing Ope, based on intel that just wasn’t true and I... I didn’t…"

The VP has a pained look on his face. These memories are still at least to some extent, open wounds.

“I know you trusted Jax, brother, but you know as well as me, that no matter his initial good intentions, he was no less of a poison than Clay.”
“An’ where are ye goin’ with all this?”
"You’re not doing anything in the shadows, brother. Sure, you visited Juice a few times in that shitty motel, but I get it. You wanted to check things out for yourself before bringing anything to the table and that isn’t compromising, that’s just fucking common sense, man.”
“T’is keeping shite hidden, an’ ye know it.”
“Ye don’t think I would’ve done the same?”
"Ye’d taken him down on spot.”

Tig sighs.

"I mean… Had it been Venus… You really think I’d not risked my patch for whatever tiny, pathetic chance that maybe, just maybe, it could’ve changed things? I love the club more than anything, brother, just not more than anyone.”
“Wha’ if he’s guilty? Wha’ if we’re takin’ care of someone who, once we have all the cards on the table, deserves to meet Mr. Mayhem?”
“Then I think it’s time to ask ourselves wwjd.”

Chibs must look as puzzled as he feels, because his VP smirks.

“What would John Teller do?”
"Ye look better."
"Yeah… thanks, man."

Chibs is right. It feels better having something on that doesn’t look like it’s about to fall off or apart. It’s almost like wearing something from his old wardrobe before he went inside. Black cargos and a soft, white longsleeve. He’s not looking quite as skinny in clothes that fit, even if the sizes on the tags make him cringe.

“You didn’t have to do this.”
“Ye don’t like’em?”
“They’re perfect, it’s just…”
“Then there’s nothin’ to discuss, lad.”

It’s the final word voice and Juice just nods then. He’s laying down, once again too tired to sit. Chibs looks tired too and Juice smiles.

“You had a good time with Kerrianne?”
“Aye. She found the clothes, by the way.”
”Tell her she’s got good taste.”
“I will. Just talked to the priest.”
“You did?”
“Aye. An’ Tig.”

The Scot sighs a little and takes Juice’s hand.

“Ye’re safe here, Juice. This… helping ye, is something the whole club is behind. If ye really don’t want our help, my help, because ye’re sure ye can handle it yerself, then I’d leave ye alone. But not if ye’re just certain ye don’ deserve it.”
“I don’t fucking deserve it.”
“An’ I’m not fucking ready to let ye go.”
“Because your wanna make sure you’re doing the right choise?”
“Aye. An’ because I love ye too damn much to risk loosing ye for the wrong fucking reason again. Whether ye think ye deserve it or not.”

The unconditional love. Juice knows how it feels to give, just not how to receive it. In his experience, there’s always been someone or something that everyone who loves him, will love more. A husband, a daughter, a patch, a principle. Every relationship, every sense of belonging he’s had, has felt like clutching onto something for dear life while showing a brave, sunny face.

The only one he ever belonged to without lies or fear involved, was Tully. The numbness took away the fear at first and after a while, the nazi rapist himself became the one who kept it away. There are literally no words for how sickly fucked up that is.

“Juicy? C’mere…”

It’s not taking the feeling away, but it stops it from growing. It’s just a hug, Juice thinks as he leans into the warm arms and Chibs mumbles in his hair.
“Ye’re such an idiot, kiddo… But I love ye, an’ I wannae trust ye again, lil’ one… No more judging just based on one dead man’s word, ye hear me? Gotta… gotta stop hatin’ yerself…”

It’s just a hug, but his body has just recently rediscovered the need for touch after a very long time and it’s impossible to resist.

“Can you just… hold me… Please?”

It’s probably unhealthy in one way or another, this need for Chibs to hold him. But it also keeps him grounded. Makes him feel less dead, less drifting. Like he’s solid again. His tiny body pressed close to the other man’s large frame.

“I’ve got ye, Juicyboy. I’ve got ye, ye muppet… Wannae earn yer trust again too…”

It seems inevitable. That for every piece of him being mended, another one gets broken. Not from hate, disgust, abandonment or despise. No, there are no hard, unforgiving words, no angry fists or dehumanizing thrusts. This is kindness and love, only healing hurts too, on it’s way across borders of time and darkness.

Trust me, baby. You’ll thank me for this, later on. Aint gonna let noone taint my boy’s skin. No, no, don’t cry, Juice. Your pretty little face will get all puffy…There we go, calm down, sweetheart… Dry your tears, boy, you’re alright…

“Juicy? Hey, don’ disappear from me now, lovey! Here, ye feel this?”

Hearbeats. Footsteps. Whistles.

Damn, Ortiz, Tully really must’ve liked you. Who would’ve thought that he’d spend all that precious money on a chica? I’m really sorry having to put you in the hole for this… I really am. Pity your daddy isn’t around to save your brown ass anymore. But don’t worry, I’ll make sure it doesn’t get too lonely…

Juice is whimpering. He’s back in the lonely cell, locked up in protected custody and oh, the irony of that name…

What’s that, chica? You wanna talk?

No. No!

I’m not saying shit.

"Juice! Juicy, come on, lovey, ye’re not there!”

Chibs? Chibs!

"I’m sorry! I never… never meant to hurt the club!”

But you did.

"I’m so sorry… Please, stop! Chibbie!”
"I’m here, Juicy, ye’re safe, kiddo.”
"Tully!?”
”S’mme, lovey, ti’s Chibbie.”

Mama…

”Mama! Mama, please! Mama, please! Please?!”

Why is everybody leaving me?
In a way, it’s like that moment of silence after a crash, a fatal gunshot. An explosion. Seconds no one care to count, paused by the smoke and ringing in your ears. Everything else is cleared, wiped out in that space of time and it’s just whatever that’s left of you and your attempt to find it. No reason, no feelings, nothing. Just a moment where nothing can be done and your body, mind and the world are all accepting that together.

Chaos can be beautiful, for a heartbeat or two. Then there are just shatters.

Chibs wipes his face on his sleeve. He shouldn’t be weeping, but he’s exhausted, his arms are fucking numb and PTSD is a bitch. What triggered it this time isn’t clear and in Chibs’ experience, it rarely is with Juice. There’s a goddamn pit of hellish memories the lad is trying to keep locked and safe and whenever it comes up to the surface, it’s fucking horrifying to witness.

Juice’s chaos isn’t beautiful in the slightest, the horrors he relives in these waking nightmares impossible to escape and the uglier they seem, the more Chibs is determined to face them, to put names and forms to them, give them all the mark of Samcro’s Reaper and condemn their causes to meet Mr. Mayhem.

He’s been holding the man for a few hours now, without really moving except from touching him. He doesn’t care either. People are coming and going. Tig, Venus, Rat, Chuckie… Kerriane stays away, wisely. She’s not supposed to see this, nor is Juice supposed to be put on display.

Chibs strokes the damp neck. Juice needs a change of clothes, drenched in sweat as he is, but all to be done now, is to keep him warm with blankets. Undressing him before he’s either asleep or a hundred percent out of the flashback, is out of the question. At the moment, he’s curled up like a little animal in shock and the shot of sedatives he had is not a solution to that particular nastiness. Blankets and Chibs’ body will have to do for the moment.

Juice cried for his mother. It’s a common thing from soldiers suffering from PTSD, or shellshock on the battlefield. Fullgrown men with machine guns suddenly curled into balls of whimpers because it’s all too much, their minds can’t handle the horror anymore and just crumbles.

“Pres?”

The voice is so low, Chibs doesn’t even flinch. Happy’s incredulous face is showing in the doorway and Chibs nods.

“Come in.”

The bruises are mostly healed now, not that Hap cares. He enters and shuts the door carefully, before squatting beside Chibs and Juice.

“He better?”

“Asleep.”

Hap just nods. Chibs rubs a hand over his face.

”Wha’s the problem, Hap? Please, don’ tell me ma lass decided to go Nomad, or something?”
“She’s in the garage with Quinn.”
"The garage?"

The man shrugs.

"You kinda told us to put her to good use, pres, and Ricky’s got a hangover, so…"

Chibs snickers at that, despite the situation. It’s not a bad idea, picking up a few things about bikes and cars. And she’s completely safe among the boys, in more than one way. What a fucked up day this is…

“So wha’s happening, then?"
“Gaines.”
"He called? What did he say?"
"That mount whitey is letting piggies use pasture land and it’s very green and juicy. His words, not mine."
“Shite…”
“No movement, though. Yet."
"They can’t get to’im here."

Only through nightmares, flashbacks and panic attacks. Tears, fear and pain. Happy chews on his toothpick.

"We gotta take them bitches down, pres."

Chibs looks at him, scrutinizing his face as if that blank mask would give away anything. Some things never change.

“No one’s running our shit, pres. Especially not screws and hicks."
"Ye’re a hick, Hap."
"All the better reason not letting them shitheads ruin’ my rep. We’ll be getting a text with instructions later today, or tomorrow."
“Coded?"
“Of course. See you didn’t take my advice, Chibs.”
"Bout what?"
"Not seeing him."

Chibs gives him a nasty look.

"An’ ye made a move despite the vote, Hap."

Hap appears completely unaffected by that and in this moment, Chibs is almost grateful for it. That there are still things that remain unchanged in all this.

“Venus made some chicken, by the way. You should take a break from this, pres."
“Cannae leave him alone quite yet.”
“I’ll take over.”
“He’ll get another panic attack if he wakes up seein’ ye.”

There’s no crash, just silence. For a moment. Hap takes out his toothpick.

“Then you better hurry.”
Chapter 107

Chapter Summary

Finally a long overdue update. Needed a little break from the angst, so I dove right into an unholy trio of porn with "Well, I wear this fuckin’ mask because you cannot handle me", to not get completely buried in all the angst I write :D

Anyways, here's Juice and Dyna. And Happy.

The palm is rough, a little hesitant, but not unkind and in Juice’s still sleeping mind, it's hard to tell whether it’s Chibs, Venus or maybe even Tully. His system isn’t reacting with panic or fear though, doesn’t really relax further either, merely registrating the feeling as unthreatening. A small, slow stroke on his hand. A second or two, then it’s gone. Juice opens his eyes.

“If you start screaming, you’ll scare it.”

That’s not why he’s silent, why his throat is closing. The kitten kneading on the Tacoma killer’s lap isn’t the reason Juice’s voice is dying before it can make any kind of respond. He simply can’t seem to find it in him to say shit.

“Didn’t hurt it, you know. Didn’t know you had it.”
"Her. Not it."
"Her. Whatever. Don’t hurt animals."
"I know."

He knows. Juice absolutely knows, without a doubt, that Happy loves killing, but only humans. Adultfuckers he thinks deserves it. Not kids, never ever animals. It’s always been difficult, putting Hap in the right box of crazy, because while he’s annoyingly simple, he also has his boundaries you’ll discover little by little.

Stabbing a preacher? No problem. Detouring over a graveyard? Hell no, unless you bring flowers. Watch a guy bleed out? Absolutely – with a smile. Leaving a dog or cat to die? No way. Hap is making an art of cynicism, but animals are innocent. He’s got that in common with Tig. And these days, after his last stint that was supposed to be the last – last of everything – Juice kinda understands them both. Humans are capable of so much shit, even when they intend on doing good. How sad is that?

Dyna knows shit about Juice’s or Happy’s transgressions. Must be nice. If there’s such a thing as rebirth, Juice would want to be a cat in a nice family. A lesbian couple, no kids, just cats and organic food. Yeah, he’s got prejudices, so what? Why can’t his mind ever just shut the fuck up, even when he’s only just awake and still tired as hell?

“Sorry ‘bout chasing you off, though.”
“Yeah, whatever.”
“Scared little shit.”
"You trashed the place."
"You ratted.”
”Aint gonna say I’m sorry, Hap.”

His former brother’s eyes are fixed upon him and Juice looks straight at him.

“Cause I know it doesn’t change what I did to you. Doesn’t matter how I feel about it, I still betrayed you and I don’t deserve forgiveness, just because I’m in a bad shape now.”

Hap doesn’t answer. It’s uncomfortable, not in a what-if-he’s-gonna-hurt-me way, but in the guilt ridden way. Because Juice did kill Miles, had Rat and Phil play Russian Roulette over a crime they didn’t commit, he lied about Tara’s murder and he stole from the club. He choked Darvany, helped Clay to escape and cowardly tried to offer intel on Samcro to the Mayans for protection.

Longing for a place, searching for connection and a life-long fear of being alone brought him down this path, because that’s what his life has been all about from the moment Brian Parks ended Emilia Ortiz’ loneliness. More than thirty years of never quite belonging, never being the most important for anyone, can make you do things you never dreamed of doing, because once you get a taste of the love, the family you never had and maybe didn’t even know you were looking for, it’s so easy to become addicted.

The man who used to be his brother, lifts the kitten, placing her on the bed.

“Glad they found her.”

Yeah. Glad. Happy. Lets put a smile on that face… Juice doesn’t really know how to answer or what to say at all, and the man who used to be his brother, who maybe doesn’t want him dead right now or at least not yet, doesn’t seem like he’s waiting for one.

“You found me.”

They’re facing each other now and Juice realises he doesn’t have to force himself to able to hold Hap’s gaze.

“Rats can’t hide out forever.”
“I have a name…”
“What?”

Juice swallows.

”Say my name, Hap.”

When there’s still silence, along with that incredulous gaze, but Juice doesn’t give in. He’s not sure why this is so important, only that it is and that Hap can’t leave this room until he reckognizes him.

“Say my name. You’re not killing me, you’re petting my cat that you almost killed… You’ve watched me sleep, you just touched my hand… Now you fucking say my name.”
“Should’ve just killed you…”

A beat. Two.
"Don’t think I’m forgiving you."
"I’m not stupid, Hap."

And maybe that’s the key. Never reaching for something you don’t deserve. Never expect a forgiveness from anyone, because only the people you hurt, knows how deep the wound you gave them went. Never insulting their grief by pushing in and demand something that can’t be given with force. Juice isn’t stupid or selfish enough to ask for that, but for a while now, he’s almost become used to be a human again, and humans have the right to a name.

Hap is a cheap bastard, or as he calls it, mindful of excessive spending, and he holds onto his forgiveness like a dragon’s treasure. You have to deserve it and even then, you may never have it.

“Thought you’d start screaming…”

Hap speaks too low now and it irks Juice, because he’s so done with games and he can’t figure out where his former brother’s going with this.

“What?”
“Said I thought you’d start screaming.”
“When?”
"Now. When you woke up."

Is that…? Yes, out of all fucking, unimaginable and crazy things, Hap sounds impressed. Juice just stares at him and the Tacoma killer, as always never shirking anything besides unnecessary emotiones, nods.

“Gotta give you that… Juice.”

At least you didn’t act like a shitscared coward this time.

Rats don’t have names, but enemies do. It’s something. It’s nothing.

It’s everything.
Chapter 108

Chapter Summary

Holy moly, I'm back. May I present Rane Quinn, who's very limited screen time made it possible for me to give Chibs a surprise :)

“Wha’ did he say?”
”Nothing.”

For a second Chibs gets annoyed, that he had Quinn reach out to Gaines because it’s always a bit of a tricky business to get a free line inside. But not hearing anything for days, was worrying and now it all seems to continue that way.

“I mean, there was nothing to say, pres.”

Quinn doesn’t look worried and Chibs frowns.

“Nothing as in no changes?”
“Yeah. Just that it’s pretty much known now that we have Juice here.”
“An’ the other charters?”
“No problems there, according to Gaines. Most people, Sons and others, think we’re keeping him for intel and…”
“To put’im down once we’re done…”
“Yeah. As long as we keep him here, Chibs, I don’t think the whiteys would do anything. They’re cowards.”

Chibs snorts.

“No, they’re not cowards. But they’re not stupid enough to start a war they know they cannae win. They try anythin’ against us, it wont matter wha’ other charters think o’ Juice and we have five times the Aryans’ members close enough to be here within 24 hours.”
“So we gotta keep Juice here.”
“Aye. An’ make sure we have all families properly armed an’ protected. No one goes anywhere alone, Quinn. Tha’ extends to old ladies an’ kids.”
“I gotta ask you something, brother, and don’t take this the wrong way.”

Quinn seems uncomfortable and Chibs hates that, because it reminds him about bad times, when there were more whispers in the corners of this house, than open hearts and mind at the table. He’s not Jax or Clay, but old wounds take a long time to heal, even for the brothers who didn’t ride with them from the start of the craziness. A time that made people hide so much, because they were afraid to speak the truth.

Chibs just nods at his brother, encouraging him and Quinn sighs.

“We both know, this isn’t just about finding out the truth about what Jax did or didn’t do behind our backs, pres. I never knew Juice and I’m not gonna pretend that I care about him, because I don’t. I
care about the club, about you and my brothers. I care about the fact that some of you may or may not made an unjust vote and that you deserve the truth, yes, but there’s more.”

“An’ wha’s that?”

“You and Juice.”

”Wha’ bout us?”

Quinn actually rolls his eyes.

”Can’t believe we’re having this conversation… Chibs, there’s only one reason you’d care this much about someone that we still don’t know if he’s innocent. Dammit, pres, you think Tig’s the only one here who likes some dick on the side?”

Chibs just stares at him, unable to actually form words and Quinn scratches his long hair, giving half a grin.

“Yeah, I’m fucking bi. There, now you know, and please stop looking so goddamn surprised, ‘cause as far as I know, there’s never been a rule against queers in Samcro.”

“No… Doubt they needed one in the 70’s… Jesus, Quinn… Ye have an’ old lady.”

”So?”

There’s a heartbeat and then, out of fucking nowhere, Chibs laughs. He laughs like he’s never done it before, almost hysterically because he’s so tired, so goddamn frayed from all of this, he just can’t help himself.

“Jesus… Mary, Mother o’ Christ, Quinn… I just…”

His brother grins, not laughing along but he’s definitely amused and Chibs, who’s barely digested the fact that his daughter apparently is a lesbian and sure as hell not digested whatever it is he feels for Juice, simply looses it.

Maybe he’s shocked, maybe he’s exhausted. Or maybe he just needs to laugh, needs something to fucking lighten up this emotional trainwreck his life has turned into. Maybe he’s become soft.

Maybe he’s just fucking human.
Chapter 109

Chapter Summary

Chibs is bad with feelings...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Stop picking at’em.”

They’re not deep, not deliberate. Nor is the scratching now. Juice just hates when it itches, he’s never been good at letting things heal. If he feels the itch, it will annoy and distract him until he can scratch.

Chibs takes his hands.

“Stop it, Juicy.”
“Not trying to hurt myself, man.”
“I know, so don’t.”

Chibs looks tired and he squeezes Juices fingers.

“Where did yer head wander off this time? Ye remember anything?”
“Something with… clothes, I think.”
“Aye. We spoke ’bout Venus an’ Kerrianne finding ye some new clothes. Then what?”

Juice shrugs.

“I really don’t know. It’s… just blank.”
“Ye had a flashback. An’ ye screamed for yer maw.”
“Jesus… Damn, I’m sorry…”
“What for? Ye’re not asking for’em, ye numpty.”
”Hap was here.”

Chibs’ eyes turn a little suspicious and Juice shakes his head on the pillow.

“Didn’t scare me or anything. Not sure, but… I think he might waiting with any… you know, Happy favourite hobbies until it’s an actual club decision.”
“No one’s gonnae do shite to ye.”
”You mean, no ones gonna do anything before they have all the facts this time.”

He swallows, picking at the duvet instead of his arms.

“You know, Chibbie… Finding out the truth is one thing, bringing justice is another… And I’m not expecting forgiveness. If… If the club comes to a decision that means you have to choose, you gotta do the right thing and choose the club.”

The Scot snorts, looking almost incredulous.
“So… we’ve gone from ‘please, don’ leave me alone’ to ‘I’ll sacrifice myself for ye an’ the club tha’ kicked me out’ now, have we? Jesus Christ, Juicy…”

“You’d not be you without the club.”

“The hell do ye know ’bout who I am or not an’ with whom, huh? Ye have any idea wha’ I risked for ye?”

“Yes.”

He speaks lower now, glancing at the man on the bedside.

“I know what you’re risking, Chibbie, I just… don’t know the end game.”

“Neither do I, lad.”

Chibs sighs, rubbing a palm over his weary face.

“I can help ye, with practical shite. Meds, food, making sure ye’re not falling off the road again. I can have people watch yer back an’ I can keep digging into the truth… But if that truth aint what I hope it is, I…”

“Have to kill me.”

Juice isn’t sure why he’s not feeling upset at all about that. Maybe it’s the fact that he already walked calmly to his death once and knows that he’s never felt more peaceful, while the long time of running from it, trashed him from the inside. Chibs, however, doesn’t look calm at all.

“Jesus Christ, Juicy… I… stop talking like tha’…”

“Okay, on one condition.”

“An’ wha’s that?”

“That if you come to that decision, please make it quick and have Venus and Tig take care of Dyna.”

“Juicy…”

“And… I don’t wanna be alone when… Tully held me for a moment when he… I just can’t stand being…”

“Stop!”

“Promise me.”

“Ye goddamn idiot, I…”

"Promise!"

Now he’s upset, but not about the idea of dying, only of the prospect of facing it alone. If he felt likes something lower than an animal when he tied the noose, at least he felt like something close to a human being when Tully respected his wish and, although failing in the end, didn’t leave him all alone with it. Excepting the same treatment, at the very least, from Chibs, is one of few wishes Juice actually feels entitled to.

Chibs just stares at him and Juice instantly recognizes the gaze, knowing what’s coming and what more is, he’s fine with it. He’s not flinching or making any resistance at all when Chibs simply hauls him across his lap, yanks his pants down and gives him a dozen solid whacks with his hand. Juice doesn’t make a sound. It stings a bit, but he’s not at all afraid Chibs will hurt him, quite the contrary.

When he’s done, Chibs moves him back onto the bed and lays down beside him. His eyes are hard, but not angry and he rubs a heated palm over Juice’s hair.

“Why did ye refuse to work with the feds inside, Juicy?”

“What?”

“Ye heard me, lad. Ye survived the nazi scumbag, ye were out of the club, ye had nothing to gain
from protecting us an’ ye could’ve had protection from lots of people inside who would’ve loved an opportunity to get intel on us.”

“So?”

“So why didn’t ye? Ye hoped we’d let ye back, or what?”

Juice laughs. He can’t help himself, because the question is just bizarre and Chibs knows that too.

“I may be a fuckup, Chibs, but no matter what you think, I’m not a complete moron. Of course I didn’t hope for that, and you know it. I wanted to… make amends.”

“Amends tha’ we wouldn’t know about?”

“But I would.”

He presses his lips hard together. His ass is throbbing a little bit, but he doesn’t care. If that’s what Chibs had to do to not actually go on and punch his lights out, then so be it. They’re still, both of them, to some extent men of Mayhem and neither of them knows how to live a life without violence. That never was an option and when thinking about it, Juice actually finds it a bit sad. That the price for the kind of freedom they longed for, always had to and always will be, paid in blood and pain. The Reaper wasn’t content with a willing, easy way out. A few stabs in the neck was too easy, Juice should’ve known.

Juice looks at the frustrated man who’ve seen so many people meet the arms of Mr. Mayhem, some of them sent there by himself. So much blood on those rough, gentle hands and still he doesn’t understand.

“You’ve never betrayed the club, or your family, Chibs. No, listen to me.”

Chibs stops in his attempt to interrupt and it feels strange to be the one doing it. To not ask or anxiously wait for permission to speak, fearing the rejection with every syllable. To actually tell someone to listen, as if what Juice Ortiz has to say, really matters.

“You don’t know how it feels, Chibs. You have no idea how it feels like, going around, knowing what you’ve done is beyond redemption. That you didn’t even mean to do it, but just were too fucking stupid and too much of a fucking coward to do the right thing when it mattered. I didn’t betray you because I wanted to or because I thought I’d gain something better from it, Chibs. I did it because I was stupid and weak enough to actually think colour mattered more to you, than loyalty, and because I thought not telling about Gemma and Tara, would somehow save Jax from the truth. I have to live with that for the rest of my pathetic life and that’s only fair. But let me tell you this, Chibbie, that not once did I think I didn’t deserve what came for me in Stockton.”

He swallows hard.

“I’m not gonna pretend that I wish it never happened. That I still wish Tully had aimed better and that I’d hated myself just a little bit more to actually do what I failed to do in the woods. It… it took so long, Chibbie… took so long before I was… numb enough to stop feeling. And he… not Tully, but… he… he just loved it when I cried. Think he actually went off from that more than…”

He can hear how Chibs’ breathing is getting faster and Juice can’t stand looking at him now, so he keeps his eyes closed because he’s still, to some extent, a coward, and that truth still hurts him too.

“I don’t even know how much of it was for the club in the end… I really don’t know, Chibbie, maybe I was just punishing myself for the sake of it, but I swear, no one got a single word out of me and… And at nights, late… when I was left alone, I didn’t think of you or Jax or the club. I thought
of Tully. Pictured him coming to me, just holding me and read me poems… He didn’t always fuck me and… he was kinda the last one who touched me without hurting me. At least not all the time…”

Tears. Not his own.

"I… I think he somehow made me, I don’t know… stronger. I know it sounds just fucked up, but it was like… If I’d survived him and what he did to me, the screws and cons and cops… There was nothing left to threaten me with, Chibbie. And you don’t have to say how crazy this sounds 'cause trust me, I know, but I still don’t know if I hate him or not. If I have it in me to… I mean, with him, at least I still was someone… Someone who’d say my fucking name…”

Chapter End Notes

19/9 2018: Hey y'all, just wanted you to know I've NOT abandoned this story at all, I'm just suffering a major writer's block with this (and many other) stories at the moment. Don't despair if you've subscribed to this story, I'm just waiting for my muse to be co-operative with this particular story again.

In the meantime, if you're up for some heavy slash threesome smut with lots of kinky BDSM stuff, check out my "Unleash Me From My Darkness" series.

*kisses and hugs to y'all*
Chapter 110

Chapter Summary

Good Lord, it's been almost two bloody months(!) and I have no idea why my muse suddenly decided to return for a moment, but hey, I guess thank you (asshole muse!). As some of you might know, I'm currently deep into the angsty bdsm smut of the "Love me at my darkest, hold me at my lowest" AU, but for some reason I started looking through this story today and well, at least here's another chapter... It's Chibs' pov and starts right after chapter 109, so no time gaps.

Thank you for your patience. Writer's block SUCKS and I don't make any promises of coming updates yet, until I know how my muse will behave.

*kisses and hugs to ya'll* <3<3<3

Clay and Jax may have been the ones silently accepting, in Jax’s case even seemingly okay with, Tig’s likes to stuff other members would’ve hung loose for, but Chibs knows it was the exception confirming the rule. As long as Tig would do he nasty ass things most members wouldn’t, being supreme loyal to the club and the only one who could babysit Gemma without getting completely run over by the queen bee, Clay and Jax didn’t care about the rest. Or him.

Having to reappraise friends and family dead and buried, relationships that despite no longer existing in the flesh, still make up so much of who you are and how you chose to live your life, is one of the worst things Chibs knows of. There was never any real acceptance, the Teller-Morrow family showed that in every sense. Husband wants change, wife doesn’t. Husband starts to withdraw, wife goes to another. None of them actually talks.

It could have ended there. With John accepting Gemma abandon him for his best friend. They no longer fitted for each other, the love wasn’t there and they both accepted that. The problem was, John never spoke to anyone about his suspicions and his book, his thoughts that first seemed to be the guide for young Jax to turn things around, turned into something else. John Teller’s warning to his sons, his confession so to speak, could have been used to something good. Instead it became a powertool in the private war between Gemma and Clay on one side, and Jax with John’s memory on the other.

John Teller would’ve forgiven Juice. Probably. You can’t really be sure, especially about people you never met, but the words he left behind pictures a man who longed for forgiveness. To have it, yes, but maybe more than anything, to actually being able to give it. To save himself from the terror of choosing loneliness in the name of some twisted version of honor. But if you can’t forgive your brothers and everyone knows that’s the deal, then there's no wonder sins will remain secrets.

Juice never had any demands, or even many wishes. And he gave himself for the club, he swallowed every last drop of the punishment. Pain, humiliation, loneliness, because he thought it was his only road to redemption. In hindsight, all the things Chibs for so long connected with loyalty and strenght: Jax’s ideals and Gemma’s family vision, Clay’s ruthlessness and even Fiona’s cause, don’t make sense anymore. For the first time, Samcro has gotten used to peace and the men of Mayhem have proved to like it far more than Chibs expected. Young and old alike.
Maybe this side of the millennium has no place for the kind of outlaw ideal Samcro’s brand speaks of. In the era of tech stuff you couldn’t dream of, of changes going way faster than any customized Harely on a high-traffic road and the most successful crimes are done way more sophisticated than simply planning a robbery and trade drugs – or weapons for a terrorist group that’s no longer even a sliver of the threat and name it once had.

Chibs is tired of fighting others wars. Of being a tool to swing against targets that later proved to be something different than the commander said. He’s tired of the casualties. Tired of mourning people all the time. There are limits for how much his reason can run the ship before his heart starts a riot.

And the only outburst it’s allowed right now, is treating Juice like some kind of unruly child and tan his arse. Chibs isn’t sure who’s more insane: him for doing it, or Juice for accepting it. The man who’s eliciting tears from Chibs right now, doesn’t make him cry for the past transgressions he, which Chibs is absolutely certain of now, probably regretted even while doing them, hating himself more than the club ever could.

Juice makes him cry for all the misery that could’ve been avoided, had the club only not turned into a festering, gaping wound everyone was either too blind or too fucking proud to try and heal. He makes Chibs Telford cry because there’s not an ounce of self-pity or cowardice left, or even vengefulness. Where Juice once would have ran off to hide, there’s now a man who for three years made it his sole purpose to face his worst fear: being alone, as punishment for letting that fear control him.

Jax, Clay and Gemma never would’ve carried their transgressions like that, never, and it’s a sickening thought that they all in some aspects, despite all the hiding and lying, felt righteous when all they did was to protect themselves. Juice lied about Tara’s murder, yes, but who’d been the one caring for him while he was a prospect? Who invited him to dinner, who made the awkward kid from Queens feel like a part of the family? Gemma, of course. And for a kid who only longed for a place to belong, to be met with the same opened arms as older, stronger members, that must’ve been a little piece of heaven. Choosing between Gemma and Jax, between the one who cared and the one who masked his indifference with shallow brotherhood, simply because Juice had walked in the exact wrong fucking moment, must’ve been unbearable.

Juice’s still scrawny hand is slowly petting Chibs’ hair. Giving comfort Chibs has never needed from anyone else, or at least never allowed himself. Fiona’s comfort was more the one of sensible words, but Juice’s is silent. It doesn’t comment, doesn’t give advices, doesn’t judge. It has no solutions, or ideas, there’s just a pair of patient arms forgiving yet another sin committed against him.

What Juice needs, what he deserves, is beyond anything Chibs or the club can give. Chibs can’t think of anyone who would’ve done the sacrifice Juice did. It could’ve ended, the rapes, the isolation, had he just remained the rat who rode off to prison on the false premises of being accepted back. Jax handed him his cut, it was never taken, Juice was never formally ex-communicated, and that’s just one of the pieces that makes this puzzle a nightmare to lay out. And the question that keeps coming back to Chibs as he accepts the comfort he doesn’t deserve, is why Juice was the only one to be exploited like this, when so many others got away with crimes they, unlike Juice, didn’t even regret and had no intention of paying for with anything but a clean, quick death, as if that could turn them into heroes.

How did they all become so… lost?
Chapter 111

Chapter Summary

Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa (und so weiter)... This chapter has been half-ready for about a month and today I finally found some inspiration again. My fickle muse is... fickle. It's really depressing when you're a fanfic writer (or any kind of creative person) and you suddenly lose your inspiration for something you're really invested in. In my case, luckily, I have not lost it altogether, but only for a number of WIP:s in different fandoms and well... it sucks, but I promise I will tell if I come to the conclusion I have put down a piece completely, which I don't plan at all.

This chapter picks up directly from 110. Chibs and Juice are laying in bed together, just trying to make some fucking sense of the world, I guess, after all the heavy talking. In this, it's Juice's time to reflect and there's a lot of survivor's guilt, Stockholm Syndrome and stuff going on in his weary head.

I won't promise anything considering updates, since I really can't tell how, when or even if my muse will cooperate, but fingers crossed, right?

*kisses and hugs to ya'll* <3<3<3

Hate. Juice has seen it so often, in so many different shapes, nothing really surprises him anymore. Instead, he realized while in prison, he's the one surprising those who thrive on hatred. Is it a weakness, not being able to hate Jax – or even Tully? If so, then it's one Juice is almost okay with. Hating, from what he's seen, seems to require a lot of effort, hardening you in a way that sure as hell will hurt your enemies, but more than anything yourself.

The scrap of kindness Tully showed him, wasn't out of any real care, or was it? In hindsight, it's become so much more difficult to define the forced relationship with the nazi, than the mutual with Jax. In a way, it was simpler with Tully, the roles and boundaries already fixed and set, no possibility to choose anything and consent was a bad joke, but it didn't fuck as badly with his mind as the one with Jax. Or did it? Just with a different kind of fucking, no pun intended – seriously, no fucking pun intended at all.

Hating someone who forced onto him the comfort that others wouldn't give with his consent, is hard. How much of the Juice Ortiz now walking on Earth is Tully's creation, is a question that for a long time has been far too painful to even touch. The fact that Tully put him through so much misery, doesn't erase the fact that he, no matter how selfish the motives, also protected him and gave comfort in moments when Juice thought he'd go insane from the guilt and sorrow. If Tully ever did one thing that didn't give him anything in return, it was that.

There was never any payment for the gentle embrace at night when Juice couldn't stop crying. Tully could've left him alone in the bunk, or fucked him, hit, cut or threatened him. He could've mocked or punished him for the display of emotions, either in front of other prisoners or in private, but he didn't. It was as if Juice's weakness was for Tully alone, like a sick treasure guarded by some nasty fairytale creature. In the end, he seemed pleased by just having Juice, knowing everyone knew he'd claimed the MC punk, including the punk himself, and then he didn't take much interest in raping
him anymore.

The strange, nightly cuddles that started out as a way to keep Juice from ruining Tully’s sleep, would soon follow on the rapes too. As if the nazi was trying to soothe the pain he didn’t have to give in the first place. The prison had more than enough of far more willing punks, not to mention white ones, and by keeping Juice alive Tully damaged the relationship with the MC, so the nazi rapist’s actions were nothing but bizarre. Juice wasn’t stupid enough to think he meant anything to Tully, but the way the man claimed him, kept other predators, even Juice’s inner ones, at bay. And in a very twisted way, it felt good not having to, not even being able to, run anymore.

He used to have comfort he’d not asked for – or wanted. Now, he’s the one comforting the man he betrayed. Is there even any use in trying to look for a point with all this anymore?

To Chibs, things have changed, that much is clear. Juice isn’t so sure about himself, though. He’s been living with the truth of his own actions, of Jax’s deal with Tully and with the silence, Henderson’s rapes and beatings, the crushing guilt and shame for so long now, it sits like a multipe piece armor around him. His guilt has become a shield, protecting him from feeling anything beyond the need for redemption and punishment. Tully, the Chinese, Henderson… none of them broke through his defences, they fucking helped him build the ones he should’ve had to protect himself from people like them.

It’s simply fubar. Fucked up beyond all reckognition and hate is a feeling that Juice isn’t familiar with unless it’s directed towards himself. Why can’t he hate? Not Tully, not Jax, not Gemma, no one. Chibs knows how to hate and to be the object of that might be one of the worst, most crushing feelings ever, far, far worse than Jax’s hate or Tully’s despise.

With Jax, although it wasn’t obvious at all until things started go really wrong, the warmth was always shallow. A means to an end, a pretty mask covering up an increasing emptiness. Was it always like that? Who the fuck knows? All Juice can recall is how easy it was to feel welcomed by the young, blonde VP when first coming to Samcro. Good looking, social, skilled and caring. Serious, sometimes a real sucker for just contemplation on the roof, reading and making notes in his little book. A good guy with genuine visions for the future, forced to try and keep balance between his own wishes, his legacy, the club and most of all his mom and stepdad.

On the surface, it would seem like his downfall started with Opie’s death and then started to spin faster and faster. Not an innocent, but somehow decent guy, by their standards, who lost control and never meant to drag others down with him. Who in the end sacrificed himself and met his death sentence with a smile. Juice feels sick, because that description could just as well be of himself. He knows he’s a coward, he’s long since confessed his sins and accepted his sentence. Not the pathetic one the world patched onto him, but what he owes the Reaper. Had the guilt only been a little bit worse than his fear of being alone, Juice knows he would’ve told Potter and Roosevelt to go fuck themselves and simply told the guys. Or at least Chibs. Had he just done that, none of this would have happened. He doesn’t waver from his guilt, God no, it’s a part of him so vital Juice honestly thinks he’d become some sort of soulless zombie disguised as a human without it.

But Jax was never alone. He didn’t feel guilt, not in the sense Juice or Chibs or even Tig does. With Jax, there was always an excuse. Always a good reason, a fair and honest goal that would explain and most of all forgive any trespasses along the way. Guys like Chibs, who aren’t cowards in any sense, because it would crush their very soul, will never understand that.

Tully did. Oh, he understood, because in so many ways, he was Jax’s mirror. The only difference
was that with Juice, he already had all the power and didn’t need to manipulate or even threaten to get what he wanted. If Jax was a predator who ran down his prey, Tully was the crow, picking whatever chunks that were left. Crow food. *Crow eater.*

Maybe that’s all they are. Jax. Tully. Himself. An endless circle of predators, preys and scavengers. It fits, it’s what they deserve, if not for their sins against one another, so for dozens of others. They’re all killers, thieves, cons and if you scrutinize their records, one would probably find enough to smack the terrorist label on them as well. But only one of them is a rapist, only one of them a traitor and no matter how much Juice deserved what was coming for him or how much of a predator Tully was, it was still Jax who pulled the strings.

Up until Chibs came back and wouldn’t finish the job, it all made sense. In a twisted, sickening way, yes, but still. And maybe that’s the reason Juice can’t find it in him to hate. Not in Tully’s disdainful, white power bullshit way, not in Jax’s egotistical offensive coldness, or even the passionate and broken yet still controlled way of Chib’s hatred. Sentimental and melodramatic as it may sound, hatred can’t fix shit. It only tears you further apart from yourself and others. Juice can’t remember a time when he felt whole, even at the best moments of his life, and when that’s the case and you’re not tough enough to make yourself inhuman, you realise that there are only so many chunks of you for the crow to feast on, only so many strings left attaching you to the people who gives you a reason to breathe, giving in to hatred wont save either of you.

The man in his arms, who’s greyish hair he’s scratching, doesn’t know how far the fear of being truly alone can push you. Of all the things Juice told that was either full-on lies or half lies, the thing about how he never meant to hurt the club, wasn’t one of them. He *did* hurt the club, worse than he’d ever been able to imagine, had he tried to. His downfall is a path of cowardice, fear and shame, secrets and lies, but also love, desperation and, no matter what Jax thought or what the remaining club members think, loyalty. There isn’t, never was and never will be, any hatred. And maybe Juice’s biggest mistake was not to realise, that for someone like Jax, hatred wasn’t a thing to fear or fight, but to embrace and use as a shield or weapon, depending on situation.

As long as the Reaper gets what he wants, who cares about those left to starve from his harvest.
Chapter 112

Chapter Summary

Happy holidays, Samcrows! Lo and behold, it didn't take two or even one month this time, so here's another round with Chibs pondering over his life, his club and his Juicyboy.

Maybe it’s the fact that she’s his flesh and blood, that he knows when she knows her da’s been crying. For all the badass and swagger, the toughness, rough fists and life and death matters, living on the edge and not just ride but owe the road attitude they all walk around with in their own way, like a mental cut to match the one in leather, Chibs can’t fool his daughter. She may be all grown up now and he might have missed most of her childhood, they may be strangers to each others in some aspects, but she knows. She’s only throwing a quick glance at him before turning back to the engine, but it’s enough.

Chibs watches her as she listens to Quinn. He’s showing her how to change a spark plug, lets her try and fail, try and fail, try and succeed. She makes a smirk and looks almost proud as Quinn pats her back, the same he would a prospect and it’s a bit unnerving, to be honest.

It started with Tig. Tig and Venus. Then came T.O. Not that outward homophobia or racism was required to earn your patch, but it certainly wasn’t a problem. Tolerance was, or really anything that could compromise your loyalty. What once was Tig’s strange on the side, is now one of the things that keeps the club alive. What once pushed Juice to suicide, now has a given place at the table and the king is dead, long live the republic. Land of the free, home of the freaks no matter the color. They all dress in black, spill red and will end up covered in white on the morgue anyway. In that sense, there’s no tolerance like the Reaper’s. To think that a club, or any gathering of people no matter the reason, can claim the one thing literally every living creature on Earth have in common, isn’t just blasphemy. It’s a whole new dimension of hubris.

The one thing Chibs has always known he wouldn’t sacrifice for his patch or anything else, is the young woman in grey, oil-stenched overall who used to ride on his shoulders and squeal from joy and excitement as her da would run and jump with her like a giggling princess, using his hair as reins.

She doesn’t remind a lot of either her parents other than some bodily features. It’s painfully obvious that she’s chosen a path far away from his and Fiona’s. She joked about the explosives, about the two patches in her family: the shamrock and the Reaper, both of whom she never chose or had a chance to reject.

So, the daughter of True IRA’s most feared woman and the pres of Samcro, one of the most violent clubs in modern day Cali, turns out to be a lesbian who’s girlfriend apparently is a hun. Back in the old days, Fiona used to keep track on how many she took out for the cause. If this isn’t God laughing in both their faces, Chibs doesn’t know what.

Poor Fiona. Yes, Chibs knows who she is, he’s under no illusions when it comes to his estranged wife, but compared to the Cause, Samcro is a sanctuary of tolerance. In Ireland, Fiona’s Ireland, for
one of the leaders of True IRA to have a lesbian daughter who instead of living a Catholic life, getting married and have children – or enter a convent or give it all for the cause – falls for a protestant girl and values her own personal freedom higher than her sacred duty to the cause, the family, the country, the church and God, is a fall from grace almost impossible to rise from. She’ll always love her daughter no matter what and rather cut her own throat than turn her back on her, but Chibs knows his estranged wife well enough to know she’d also be heartbroken.

Realising he’s staring at his lass and Quinn, Chibs turns around and walks back inside. It’s half past two and there’s a smell of coffee coming from the combined bar and kitchen area. Chuckie likes routines and when he sees the pres, he immediately pours him a cup and Chibs thanks him with a smile. Chuckie is an absolute amadán but he has his uses. The place would probably fall apart without him.

Chibs walks lazily to the dorm and the room he’s been avoiding pretty much all day, leaving Venus to the task because he doesn’t know where to pick things up from yesterday.

You have no idea how it feels like, going around, knowing what you’ve done is beyond redemption.

Oh yeah? Then what’s this swelling growth in his chest if not the sum of all the things he’s done that’s unforgivable, sins he’d never take to confession because they’re just parts of the life he chose that no longer can be replaced. Vital organs of violence and transgressions, working from rightfully condemned traitors and innocent victims alike, the blood of those who owed it to him as well as those who just happened to come in the way. The only one Chibs has never been able to bleed out from his heart, is the very same he told to eat his gun and swore never to think of again.

The man who’s resting again, with that damn kitten by his feet, isn’t the same person who left on his very last mission from the Reaper to Stockton. In a way, this one is both far more broken and yet so much stronger, less of a traitor but still with too much blood on his hands even for the Reaper to handle. Jax and Gemma left with heads held high, proud even in their last moments, choosing their end but how many lives had they tried to control and choose for others before that moment? Taking a life was never as serious a matter to them, as for Chibs. He’s not considering himself a good or moral man at all, but he’s not heartless. Realising how much love he’s given to a family where a wife kills her husband only to die by the hands of her son, a son who rather than still being there for his boys, the only parent they have left after their grandmother killed their mother, goes out like he’s still on moral highground, is like looking himself in the mirror and no longer recognising the man staring back.

Juice’s features still look more dead than alive, but it’s a far cry from the man Chibs looked up at the motel. What happened in prison that made an AB shot caller leave his entire fortune to his half Puerto Rican, half black punk? Was it guilt or just a nasty way of fucking with Juice one last time? Or a beef with his nazi buddies? A way of being the puppet master even from the grave, as some ultimate show-off? Or did the nazi scumbag actually start to care about Samcro’s, or rather Jax Teller’s little gift and felt a scrap of remorse?

What Juice went through inside is unforgivable. Tully will never have Chibs’ forgiveness, not that he’d care, but what about the man who handed Juice over? What about Jax or Gemma? What about Chibs himself? Juice wasn’t innocent, but he was more lamb than wolf and everyone knew that.

Chibs takes the man’s hand. He never figured out why, of all the lost brothers and betrayals, Juice’s downfall was the one he couldn’t get over. He loves all his brothers, even those who fell by their own choosing, but not like him. None like Juice.
For years he was able to ignore those microscopic moments when his mind would registrate that breathtaking smile and wonder how soft those lips would be. How he pretended not to see that silent adoration, one that didn’t see the patch or the swagger or even the bloody scars, but just bled out from his almost puppylike eyes no matter what Chibs would do or say. Juice is the only one who never seemed to really see the patch at all, only the man wearing it and it scares the living shit out of Chibs.

He’s given the Reaper so much over the years and it’s finally becoming clear to Chibs, that He’s never content. No pound of flesh will ever be enough to turn those bones to something warm and living, or put an end to the raging hunger so what’s the point of feeding it?

Or maybe Juice’s return is the exact opposite. A sign of the Reaper putting his scythe to rest and declines another serving because He’s actually full and satisfied now. And a man who rides under the Reaper’s sign, isn’t above accepting His leftovers. After all, it’s those who are left behind after He’s been swinging his scythe, those He didn’t choose this time that will keep you alive and make you who you are.

What is that if not a second chance?
Chapter 113

Chapter Summary

"How are you holding up, Juan?"
"Alright. How did you come in, padre? We’re, they’re on lockdown."

Not we. Never we. He’s actually sitting up fully dressed now, not even tucked under the cover and Juice pretends he doesn’t mourn the loss of Chibs’ arms around him. Padre Mark doesn’t seem too uncomfortable with visiting the clubhouse belonging to one of the most violent gangs in Cali, in fact he looks far more at home than even Unser ever did.

“Mr. Telford gave me a free pass for sneaking in.”
“And what about your congregation?”
“Even a priest has some hours off.”
”And you spend them here? You need a hobby, padre. If you don’t watch out, you might end up prospecting.”
“Well, I’ve never been that good in keeping up hobbies, to be honest. Somehow, I always end up doing something connected to my call.”
“Like visiting trash outside your congregation?”
“You’re referring to yourself or the club?”

Juice shrugs. For once, there might be no difference. He loves his former brothers but they’re trash and so was he when he was still one of them. It never mattered, still doesn’t. They’re still trash, it’s only him who’s turned out to be toxic waste. In a sick sense it feels good to admit that to himself. It doesn’t make them anymore even, but the comparison seems closer to truth than a simple black and white scale of good and evil. They’re all trash in one way or another, at least that won’t change. You have to be, or have been, a part of it to be able to separate the rotten garbage from the rest, or even see the difference. It’s impossible to use any kind of normal scale of good and bad, fairness and justice, honor and cowardice to the life of a Son. Or life in prison.

He missed Tully because it was better with a rapist who wasn’t violent in other ways. Apart from calling him Puerto Rican every now and then, the AB shotcaller never actually threw any racial slurs at him, just as he never hit him or tried to make the rapes physically painful. There’s far too much truth in how grateful you can be for a scrap of kindness when you’re in Hell. If Tully was purgatory, Henderson was from a deep as fuck pit of Hell.

Juice isn’t sure when he stopped feeling, only that it took surprisingly short time before it happened. He’d started to shut down already when Henderson flickered the flashlight over him at night, keeping the keys from rattling too much and whispered the usual orders.

“Juan…?”

He looks up, vision blurred now and he realises he’s slipping back in his memories, unable to stop.
“What’s happening, son?”

A walk, not in dark, but in cold light. Stairs, doors and locks. Secured passages, keys and the billy club pointing in his back if he dragged his feet. The silent promise of more pain if he didn’t comply, knowing that this guard would never kill him even by accident, just inflict enough pain to make him regret the resistance.

It was always worse those days when he’d been interrogated and wouldn’t give in. He’d flipped before, Juice could understand why the cops kept coming, kept trying to milk it with all they knew about his earlier co-operation. What they fucking never learned, was that there was no such leverage anymore. That Juice couldn’t be bought with anything, because a dead man has no needs and by extension no rights. He’d already paid with his patch and had nothing left to bargain with. He’d never try to buy his way out anymore and when the feds and even the local cops and his lawyer eventually got tired of him, the punishment for his lack of co-operation would be doled out by Henderson.

The guard had no clue. He knew nothing of how Tully, accidently or on purpose, had built Juice into something unbreakable. Not from care or kindness, but not really out of cruelty either. More a sick curiosity combined with an even more twisted obsession with control that wasn’t even about showing off his power to the Sons or the AB or the rest of the prison. No, Tully wasn’t a collector of damaged goods, or a puppet master, but a maker. He’d take what was offered to work with and then got off on the power that laid in remaking what others had deemed useless. Like a punk traitor who didn’t even put up a resistance.

He made Juice cry for him down in the clinic. In that small, too white room with the paper covered examining table and cold, sharp lights. When the pain was still not enough to make him pass out, Juice would cry for his dead rapist, the only savior he deserved.

“Juan, listen to my voice, son. You’re not back wherever your mind is taking you right now. You’re safe, you’re not alone and no one is hurting you.”

No one? Really?

He takes a breath, it’s too deep and sharp, the pain shatters his body but also the flashback and he can see the priest now, through a curtain of blurry tears, cramped up under his eyelids. Then he feels something warm and soft on his lap and the vision gets yellow-reddish, the stainless steel on his palms turns to living fur and a low vibe. He’s alive and wishes to God that he wasn’t.

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