

The canteen of Manchester General hospital was unusually crowded for 6 AM as a dozen junior doctors stood talking amongst themselves. The display of light-blue scrubs gave the off-white walls something to envy.

“Why the fuck did this have to be right when I should be at the gym?” said a broad-shouldered man who stood out from his peers with an unconventional mohawk. He stretched his legs awkwardly to the disdain of the doctor standing next to him.

“This is the job we signed up for, Soap,” replied the man with a buzzcut standing next to Soap. “They decide the shifts and we decide who lives and dies.”

“Fuck off, Gaz,” Soap pushed Gaz’s shoulder playfully and, nearly spilling the un-lidded coffee cup in his hand. The vending machine Gaz had gotten it from malfunctioned, already spilling half the burnt liquid onto the linoleum. Soap took it as a sign that their first day was not destined to go well.

“We’re lucky to still have jobs in Manchester,” Gaz said, rubbing his shoulder mockingly. “I looked it up: most hospital mergers result in at least 50-percent of staff being relocated across Britain.”

Their old hospital had merged into Man Gen that summer. Soap and Gaz knew most of the people standing around them and were happy to see familiar faces, but there were several missing. Unease had gripped them for months, unsure if they were going to be separated after finally finding their groove as roommates.

The double doors at the far end of the room opened with a bang, and a shared jump waved through the group. Everyone straightened to attention as a handful of senior consultants quickly made their way in front of the crowd. A woman in her late-50s, by Soap’s best guess, led the pack, clipboard in hand.

She wasted no time in silencing the room as she addressed them.

“Alright,” she boomed, her voice carrying for such a small frame, “Sorry to keep you waiting, but unfortunately this is a hospital and sick people don’t exactly work on a schedule.”

A polite laugh ran through the crowd. Soap swore he heard a chorus of the word “American” in reaction to her accent.

“Well, I’m not known for my jokes, so let’s press on. My name is Dr. Laswell, and I am in charge of clinical education here, which you may have known if you read your info packets that were sent to you last week.” She held up a booklet that Soap and Gaz had unceremoniously spilt tequila on during their last pregaming session. “It’s my duty to make sure you find where you’re supposed to be during this transition and are working with the right people.”

She tilted her head back in reference to the other senior doctors behind her.

“You will have weekly check-ins with your assigned managing consultant who will be reporting to me. Any screw ups will be logged and you will be evaluated every rota change. Please do not make this any more difficult for me as I, too, am still a practicing doctor and just as busy as the lot of you.”

Gaz leaned into Soap’s space and gestured to the back of the group of consultants, whispering, “Soap, take a look at the two in the back.”

Soap shifted his head up to look over the crowd of mostly nondescript doctors to the two Gaz was referring to. They wore faded blue scrubs, but stood out from the crowd: The older of the two had dark brown hair trimmed neatly to the curve of his head and a friendly mutton chop to give him a serious-yet-inviting look. The other had striking blond hair in a mess of lengths peeking out of a black surgical cap that nearly covered his eyes. He wore a black surgical mask that had an odd pattern of stripes of white, almost like the whites of teeth. He stood imposingly at the very back of the group, arms crossed over a massive chest that made Soap envious.

Soap leaned over to whisper into Gaz’s ear, “With my luck imma get Mr. Skelington there.”

“With your luck you’re going to end up his bitch,” Gaz whispered back as Soap quietly snickered.

“Any problems?” Dr. Laswell suddenly stopped what she was saying and interjected, noting the junior doctors not paying attention.

Soap and Gaz fought off the urge to flinch and returned to their attention-drawn positions.

“Didn’t think so,” continued Dr. Laswell. “Now, when your name is called, please follow your managing consultant to your new station and get to work.”

Dr. Laswell named off several specialties, after which the junior doctors approached, met their new boss and started the day's work. Gaz left with a handful of others with a quiet man in a sand-colored cloth mask for neurology half-way through the list. Eventually, Soap was left alone in the room with Dr. Laswell and the two towering doctors Gaz had pointed out.

"John MacTavish," Dr. Laswell said as the three moved up to greet Soap. "So you're the lone wolf A&E junior then."

"Yes, ma'am," Soap said instinctively.

"Ma'am, how quaint," said Dr. Laswell with a smile. "This is Dr. Price," she gestured towards the mutton chopped man, "and Ghost, aka, Dr. Riley."

Price gave a slight bow of his head while Ghost remained still, golden brown eyes burning holes into Soap's, body unmoving.

Soap put his hand out to Price who took it warmly. He then offered his hand to Ghost, who took it in a tight clasp but released it in a flash.

"You can call me Soap if yer going by nicknames," Soap said with a grin.

Dr. Laswell gave a small laugh and Price nervously looked away with an awkward smile. Ghost remained stoic. Dr. Laswell patted Price's shoulder and left the room without a word in a hurry.

"So, what made you want to actively slum it with us in good ol' Accident & Emergency then?" Price had closed in on Soap, standing half a head taller than the junior doctor before him.

"Well, I sucker for sufferin' I guess," Soap said, his grin expanding across his face.

"Scottish," came a rumble from behind the mask. Soap met Ghost's piercing eyes.

"That's right," John said. "Glasgow born and raised. Guessin' we're on your home turf, Ghost?"

Ghost grunted but didn't break eye contact. Soap couldn't tell what was going on behind the eyes that seemed to be searching for something.

“Well, glad to have you,” Price interjected. “Let’s get to work.”

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The three left the canteen as Price whisked the group towards the A&E wing. He passed a flurry of nurses and doctors, patients and porters as they briskly made their way.

“I must say, it’s something special to have someone specializing in trauma right out of their foundation,” Price said while they power walked down another hallway. “Usually takes a couple years for folks to settle on A&E, and the burnout weeds through nearly everyone.”

“Not me, sir,” Soap said as they sharply turned a corner, nearly bumping into Ghost. “I find it energizing.”

“Well, you’re alone at this stage in the game, unfortunately. You’ll mostly be working with the two of us. Short-staffing issues. Your fellow juniors will be rotated in regularly.” He sighed, adding, “A&E gets busier but funding stays the same.”

They finally arrived in the A&E wing, which was bizarrely located a good five minutes from any other major part of the hospital. They entered a hallway which jutted out from where they stood into a row of intake bays on both sides, only a medical staff station with computers and phone on the far end. Across from the station, a handful of specialty trauma bays were decked-out in fancier equipment. It was full of medical staff dashing between bays in a kind of dance to the music of crying, grunting and raised voices.

“You know the drill by now,” Price grabbed an older-model iPhone from his pocket that was in a thick, light pink case and handed it to Soap. “That phone is your lifeline. You do not lose it. Number’s on the back, memorize it. Do not put it on silent mode, ever. If I page you, you get your arse to me or Ghost as soon as possible.”

Price walked over to a wall next to the station and stood in front of a red, corded phone mounted on it.

“Red phone duty is shifted throughout the week, your first day is tomorrow. Have you worked a red phone yet?”

Soap looked at the red phone. “Not myself, but I’ve relayed cases plenty.”

“Good,” Price smiled. “Same thing, just write down what they say on the other end and yell out what’s coming. The nurses are your powerhouse and lifeline, they’ll rally with you as soon as you do. We respect nurses here; if I hear about you playing god with them, you will answer to me.”

Price looked down as his phone made a chirping sound.

“Right, I’ve got to go. But I leave you in the very capable hands of Ghost here.” Price patted Ghost on the shoulder hard before turning and rushing back the way they came.

Soap looked up at his stand-in boss, and their eyes locked in again. He waited for some kind of signal from Ghost as to what to do next, but the staring didn’t let up. Although Soap couldn’t see his full face, Ghost’s unobscured features weren’t unappealing. He was so blond that even his eyelashes were visibly the same nearly-platinum color as his hair, and Soap could see a well-kept scruff run under the mask. Soap assumed Ghost had some kind of phobia to people seeing his face, or maybe just kept his mask on for infection prevention reasons. Whatever it was, Soap figured Ghost’s skull-like mask must bother some of the patients.

“That’s...” Soap started to convey the thought, but decided to keep his commentary to himself so quickly into working with a superior.

“Yes?” Ghost asked curtly, the gruffness of his voice hitting Soap’s ears.

“Erm, an interesting mask?”

“That a question?” Ghost responded, one eyebrow raised.

“Well, just,” Soap put a hand on the back of his neck, “Do the kids sometimes get a bit freaked out? Looks like a skull mask is all...”

“Factory error,” Ghost said flatly. “Got ‘em for cheap in bulk at the start of COVID. Still haven’t run out.”

“Ah,” Soap responded. “Lucky you.” Soap was at a loss for what to say, which almost never happened to him. He could befriend a rabid dog, but Ghost was giving him pause. He heard a grumble coming from Ghost’s chest as a pregnant pause settled over them.

The red phone rang with a shrill, old-school bell noise that made Soap jump.

“Ghost!” A nurse, already holding a phone at the station shouted. “Can you get the phone, love?”

Ghost whipped around and snatched the phone off the wall.

“Man Gen A&E,” he barked, listening to the other end and writing into the binder in front of the phone.

“Got it,” he ended the call. “Car crash, two conscious, one walking, second with acute injuries, 10 minutes out!” He shouted towards the station.

Ghost quickly moved toward an empty trauma station and began checking the equipment. Soap followed, but stayed back a good distance from the bed.

Ghost noticed Soap’s hesitancy and barked at him to prep the bed. A nurse came over and showed Soap the standard practice. It annoyed him as Ghost should know that every hospital has different routines, and it was Soap’s first day. It was starting to seem like Ghost had no interest in teaching Soap the ins and outs.

Soap met the ambulance as it arrived exactly 10 minutes later with a mother and her 7-year-old son who’d been in a car sideswiped by another. The mother was walking whilst holding some gauze to a bleeding cut on her forehead, whispering to her son who was groaning on a gurney, clutching his forearm.

Soap escorted the two to the bed waiting for them.

“History, Soap,” Ghost asked for all to hear.

“Thirty-nine-year-old Sandy and her son Henry,” Soap started as he helped the paramedics move Henry from the gurney to the trauma bed. “Collision to the passenger side on a side street. Sandy has a lesion just above the hairline while Henry has a suspected fracture in his arm and or chest, couldn’t make out which in route.”

Ghost leaned over Henry.

“Henry,” he said in a new tone, one lighter than before but still firm. “My name is Dr. Riley. Can you tell me where you’re hurting?”

Henry blinked up at Ghost with tears in his eyes. At first, Henry looked like he might scream at the sight of Ghost, his quickened breathing audible to Soap.

"It's alright," Ghost put a hand on the boy's head, lowering his voice. "I'm here to help get you better. I know today has been scary but I need you to be brave for me, OK?"

Henry's face softened and he took a slow breath in, starting to explain how a car suddenly hit them on their way to school.

"My arm was between..." Henry sniffed, "Between the door and the seat. It really hurts."

"And how about your side," Ghost placed a hand gently pushing on Henry's ribs. "Does it hurt when I do this?"

Henry shook his head.

"OK, great. That's really good, Henry. I think we need to get some x-rays of your arm, OK? Have you had an x-ray before?"

Henry shook his head.

"Well, good news for you: You just sit there while the machine beeps a bit. It doesn't hurt at all," Ghost stood up and started preparing the x-ray equipment.

"Mum," Ghost turned to Sandy who was sitting next to the bed, frazzled, holding onto Henry's good hand. "I'm gonna ask Dr. MacTavish here to help you next door and get you checked out. Henry is gonna be just fine for a few minutes and we can't have you getting unnecessary radiation, alright?"

Sandy nodded her head shakily and spoke reassurances to Henry before Soap led her a few feet to the intake bay next to them.

Soap donned latex gloves and gently examined the wound: not big, he concluded, but seemingly pulled apart rather than sliced.

"Can you remember how you got this cut, Sandy?" Soap asked and he brushed her hair aside in order to put temporary dressing on it.

"I can't say I do, no," Sandy's voice was airy. "I didn't see the other car...one minute I was looking ahead, the next I was blinking my eyes open and Henry was screaming."

“Hmm...” Soap was worried. “I don’t like the sound of that, to be honest.” Soap began applying butterfly bandages to Sandy’s head. “I’d like to get a CT scan to make sure you didn’t knock your head too hard.”

“Can we do that after Henry is done? I don’t want to leave him alone.”

“I think they’re about done with the x-ray. Can you wait a moment while I talk to Dr. Riley?”

Sandy nodded. Satisfied that the cut itself was superficial and could wait on stitches, Soap made his way to Ghost, who was standing away from Henry’s bed as he let the x-ray machine click and buzz.

“I suspect she hit her head during the crash,” Soap started in a low voice. “Worried she might have a concussion or worse. Wanna get her a CT.”

“Do it,” Ghost responded. “CT is on the third floor. Follow the signs and you’re there. Phone them ahead of time; number should be in your phone already.”

Soap nodded and grabbed a wheelchair folded along the wall and wheeled it over to Sandy. He felt a wave of relief as Ghost added details about what to do next; he had already planned on asking a nurse where to go and was glad he didn’t have to.

“OK, let’s go talk to Henry,” said Soap as he flattened out the folded wheelchair seat. “As a precaution I’d really like you to use this.”

Sandy was hesitant.

“I didn’t get my morning work out in,” Soap added, “So you’d be doing me a favour.”

Sandy smiled, carefully maneuvered herself into the chair and was rolled to Henry’s side.

“How are you doing, sweetie?” Sandy took Henry’s hand.

“It didn’t hurt,” he said with a weak smile, “Just like Dr. Riley said.”

“I don’t make a habit of lying to my patients,” Ghost said with an audible smile. “Hey, Henry?” Ghost sat on the end of his bed, which creaked under his considerable weight.



“Just like how we needed to do your x-rays, we wanna do a fancy x-ray on your mum to make sure her head is alright. She should only be gone a little while, OK?”

Henry looked worried and squeezed his mom’s hand.

“If you want me to stay, I’ll stay,” said Sandy while Soap cringed at the idea of letting her stay too long without being properly evaluated.

“No,” Henry’s voice turned boisterous, “I’m one of the big kids now, mum. I’ll be ok.”

With a final squeeze of Henry’s hand, Sandy nodded to Soap. He wheeled her down the hall to the elevators.

“He’s got a way with kids, doesn’t he?” Sandy said once they were out of earshot.

“He certainly does,” replied Soap, bewildered.

“I must say, when I saw the mask and everything I was concerned.” Sandy chuckled.

“I had the same reaction.”

“Have you been working together with him long?”

“Uh, actually it’s my first day...” Sandy looked backwards in her wheelchair. “Working with Dr. Riley I mean, I’ve been a doctor for a while now.” Soap tried to cut the tension with a laugh.

“Oh, well, congratulations on the new job?”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

CT was backed up as it always was in hospitals Soap had worked at. He had found the pre-listed number in his phone and called ahead as-instructed and was told it would be 30 minutes, but an hour later Sandy was getting antsy. Ghost had ordered Soap to stay with Sandy, which either meant A&E was having a slow day or he was tapped out with helping his new colleague already. Soap repressed the thought and occupied himself with setting up his new phone in the meantime.

“I really think we should go back,” she said, making to get out of the wheelchair.

“You really need this scan, Sandy,” Soap put a hand on her shoulder.

Sandy turned around. “Am I going to die if I don’t get this scan?”

“Honestly ma’am, that’s what we have to rule out,” Soap walked around to Sandy’s front and squatted to get eye-level. “Someone thinks it’s just a bump and they’re in trouble a few hours later.”

Wide-eyed worry flashed across Sandy’s face.

“I’m sorry to be extreme,” Soap said, putting a hand on Sandy’s that was resting on the wheelchair arm, “But I want to make sure you’re around for Henry, ya know?”

Sandy took a moment but eventually nodded silently and relaxed back into the chair.

It was at that moment a CT technician ushered them into a prep room. Fifteen minutes later, Sandy was finally having her scan, a mechanical bed feeding her into a white, giant doughnut of a machine. Soap waited with the technician as the scan results started appearing, tapping his fingers to the beat of the clicks and hums of the CT machine.

“Soap, right?” Price appeared behind Soap, making him jump. He hadn’t even registered the door behind him opening. “That’s your nickname?”

“Yes, sir,” replied Soap, “Got a thing for washing my hands. Lads at the old hospital wouldn’t call me anything else.”

“Well, just be sure to use plenty of moisturizer. Don’t want any nasty infections getting in the cracks.”

Soap reached into his scrubs pocket and pulled out a small bottle of antibacterial hand moisturizer. Price laughed and started asking Soap how many bottles he went through a week.

“Doctors,” the technician interrupted them, “I think you should see this.”

Soap and Price leaned in as the initial scan results came in.

“Jesus,” Price’s voice went quiet. “Call neuro now.” The technician picked up a phone next to him.

Soap could see what Price was worried about: a brain bleed. Not the biggest, but Soap knew if she wasn't in surgery to at least relieve the pressure on her brain soon, she would not make it to the end of the day. With the size of the bleed, Soap was surprised at how lucid Sandy was.

"What should I do?" Asked Soap.

"Go back to A&E with Ghost," Price said, grabbing his own phone. "I'll call when I know more."

Soap did as he was told, jogging back to A&E. He found Ghost standing at the station doing paperwork.

"Ghost," Soap said, slightly out of breath. Realizing they were within earshot of Henry's bed, he lowered his voice to a whisper. "Henry's mom is being rushed to surgery. Brain bleed."

Ghost didn't look up from a chart he was studying. "Price texted."

"We should tell Henry—" Soap started.

"Nothing," Ghost said quickly. "Protocol is to wait for the next of kin for minors. Did she mention a husband?"

"No," Soap said.

Ghost finally lifted his head from his paperwork, slowly letting his piercing gaze return to Soap with a hint of anger. "Was it not you who did intake?"

Soap flushed red, realizing he didn't ask for an intake form when the two arrived. He also didn't realize there was an intake procedure to be followed, but he had rushed to bring the pair in from the ambulance and hadn't asked.

"I...I'm sorry," Soap looked down as Ghost let out an aggravated sigh.

"Dammit...that means we have to call child protection."

Ghost left Soap standing here, head hung while he searched for the number to call. First major trauma and Soap was feeling like a massive fuck up.

“It’s OK, cutie,” an older nurse—Gemma—sitting at the station leaned in to whisper to Soap. “It’s your first day and we all make mistakes. Just remember this for next time. Why don’t you see if reception has anyone for you?”

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Hours passed and a sudden influx of cases—heartburn, scrapes and a panic attack—kept Soap busy. Between patients, he tried to stop in to keep Henry company, and often found Ghost already in the bay with him. After bringing Henry a juicebox to tide him over, Soap realized he hadn’t eaten lunch. He pulled out his personal phone and texted Gaz.

Soap: You eat yet?

Gaz: Hours ago, you?

Soap: 😞

Gaz: That bad?

Soap: Wouldn’t happen to have a break soon?

Gaz: In a lull, I can give you 5 minutes

Soap: 🍷

They met in the canteen 10 minutes later, Soap expending some of the last of his energy on the long trip back to where he started the day. Soap blurted out his mistake with intake and the looks Ghost kept giving him.

“He never lets up once he has yer eyes locked in,” Soap said as he tapped his card to the vending machine for a Snickers. “Makes it a million times worse when ye screw up...”

“And how’s it feel when you AREN’T doing something wrong?” Gaz asked in a sly tone.

“Why do you think everything is flirting?” Soap bit into the snack bar. “And I’m not getting any vibes from him that way.”

“Well, he’s basically in drag at work,” Gaz fiddled with the finicky coffee machine for the second time that day. “That’s high camp if I’ve ever seen it.”

Soap muttered nothings into his food as he pulled out his work phone to make sure he wasn’t missing any messages. “Are you in here by default or something?”

“No, here,” Gaz put his work number into Soap’s phone. “My consultant doesn’t want us with personal phones on the floor. I say he can suck my ass.”

“He’d be so lucky,” Soap said and was met with a much lighter play-punch to the shoulder from Gaz than the one he dished out that morning. As he did, his phone chirped as a message from Ghost came in: *Child protection taking too long. Help me with Henry.*

Gaz looked over at Soap’s message. “Well, guess you’re not completely in the doghouse.”

“Second chance,” Soap said as he put his phone away and started jogging towards A&E, candy bar still in his mouth.

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Ghost was waiting outside the curtains of Henry’s bed as Soap trotted into the room. Ghost suddenly leaned in close to Soap’s ear, making Soap jump back ever so slightly.

“Child protection can’t send someone for another three hours, and internal is swamped. We have to set his arm soon or it’ll be worse later.”

Soap looked up into Ghost’s gaze to get some idea of what he was thinking. A somber look stretched across his visible features. Soap nodded, and they pulled back the curtain.

Ghost sat on Henry’s bed while Soap went to check on his IV.

“How’re ya hanging in there, champ?” Ghost asked.

“Where’s my mum?” Henry was trying hard to fight the urge to sound desperate.

“Your mum’s scan showed something a bit worrying, mate,” Ghost said as he put a hand on Henry’s shin. “The doctors are gonna have to fix the bump on her head in surgery.”

“What’s wrong with her?!” Henry nearly screamed. Ghost remained unflinching.

“You know how you bleed on the outside when you get a cut?” Ghost began. “Well, sometimes you can bleed inside, and it needs to be fixed right away. Dr. MacTavish

here found that bleed and the doctors upstairs are going to do what they can to fix it. As soon as we know more, we'll tell you."

Henry had tears in his eyes as he took in the information. Soap couldn't tell if Ghost was getting through to Henry with brutal honesty.

"Hey Henry," Soap stepped towards them. "Do you have a dad or grandma or grandpa around?"

Henry shook his head. "It's me and my mum. She works every day; says it's to keep us going since it's just us." He choked through the last words.

"Well," Ghost said, patting Henry's shin, "You have us now, too. We're gonna get you through this next bit. It's gonna be a bit rough—remember, I don't lie. Your arm is broken and we have to line it up so it'll heal right. It's gonna hurt." Henry grabbed Soap's arm which was resting on the pillow under Henry's head and started shaking. "The good news is you're gonna get an awesome cast that the kids at school can sign," Ghost leaned in towards Henry. "You're gonna be the cool kid for a few weeks."

Henry's tears rolled down his face as he struggled to find his breath between sobs.

"Kiddo," said Soap, "You're gonna be just fine, and your mum needs you to do this for her." He gently lifted Henry's good arm around so he was looking into the boy's tear-soaked eyes. "This is the bravest thing you've ever had to do, but we're right here for you."

Henry sniffed hard and looked between them for a moment before nodding his head.

"That's a good lad," Ghost said, sliding off the bed. "Dr. MacTavish here is gonna get you set up with a little medicine to keep you comfortable while I get another big, strong doctor to get your arm set straight."

Henry's hand was holding Soap's so tightly, and Soap didn't want to let go as Henry's tears continued. He was relieved that a nurse—Jack—had joined them during their peptalk to get medications started. Ghost left to begin contacting the appropriate support teams, leaving Soap half-cuddling Henry.

Thirty minutes passed and the light sedative and re-upped painkillers were in enough effect that Soap could let go of Henry without risking another crying fit. As much as Soap was a doctor first, he still couldn't leave the poor kid's side, charting with one hand

while the other wrapped around Henry's shoulders. Once Henry was dozing, he joined Ghost at the station.

"Shouldn't let patients get that close, Soap," Ghost said as he worked on his own paperwork. "Only makes it harder when shit hits the fan."

Soap's brow furrowed. "He's 7-years-old, Ghost," he said in a hushed voice. "He could lose his mother today. I'm gonna do what I can to comfort him."

Ghost huffed through his nose. "Just sayin'," he said dryly. "Don't want you to make my mistakes."

Soap attempted the mental gymnastics that Ghost had set him up for him but was interrupted as the orthopedic consultant for Henry approached them.

They made their way to Henry, who was still barely awake, but sat up to attention at the entrance of a new doctor. While Ghost and Soap stood by Henry's side, Soap holding Henry's good hand the whole time, the consultant pulled Henry's arm straight with a sharp click. The lack of screams from Henry only made Ghost and Soap shower him with more compliments for getting through the worst of it.

Ghost's phone went off in the middle of adding new blankets to Henry's bed. He made sure Henry was distracted before getting close to Soap's ear, making him seize up from the sudden intrusion, goosebumps erupting on his exposed arms.

"Sandy made it through, sent to recovery. Kid can see her soon," Ghost said, his breath partially escaping out the sides of his mask and tickling the exposed skin of Soap's neck. "Go ahead and break the news."

Soap gulped at the assault of sensations from Ghost, but nodded, his expression brightening as he turned to Henry.

"Hey Henry," Soap said with a now massive smile, "Your mum's head is all fixed up. She's resting and you can see her in just a bit after you've got your cast on."

Henry burst into silent tears as he nodded furiously. Soap put a hand on Henry's head and Ghost squeezed his good arm.

"It's all working out just fine, Henry," Ghost said warmly. "We'll have you back with mum in no time."

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Soap's shift ended at 6 PM and he found himself arriving at the locker room just as Gaz did.

"Need a fuckin' drink," Soap said as he threw his soiled scrubs into the dirty bin and stretched. "Fuckin' roller coaster today."

"I'll say," Gaz pulled on track pants. "That A&E patient you sent up nearly checked out on us."

"What?" Soap stopped half-way through pulling on a t-shirt.

"Yeah, she nearly coded during her craniotomy. First day and the one surgery I see is tense as all hell."

"She'll be ok, though, won't she?"

"I suppose, if she wakes up," Gaz added as was tying up his shoes.

Soap threw on the rest of his clothes and was out of the locker room as Gaz yelled after him: "Hey, were you serious about those drinks?!"

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A few floors up, Soap found his way to where Sandy was recovering from surgery. Despite the operation having been done hours earlier, she had yet to wake. Soap knew that the longer she stayed unconscious, the higher the chance she never would.

Already in the room was a child protection rep on a laptop while Henry sat in a chair right next to his mother's bed. His cast was bright green and bore pathetic drawings Soap and Ghost had attempted of their respective nicknames as emojis.

"Soap," came a voice from behind him. Soap turned around to find Ghost, also out of scrubs in a black t-shirt and black jeans, but still in a black mask.

"Ghost," Soap replied. They stood at a medical station while looking into Henry's room. "Friend told me she hasn't woken up since surgery. Can we go in and say anything to Henry?"



“Of course,” Ghost said as he stepped ahead of Soap towards the room.

“What was that about keeping distance from patients?” Soap asked in a near-mocking tone.

Ghost merely grunted at him as they entered the room.

Henry looked over as they entered, his expression brightening ever so slightly at the familiar faces. Ghost nodded to the social worker, briefly mentioning they were Henry’s doctors.

“How’re ya holding up, mate?” Ghost knelt down beside Henry’s chair.

“I’m bored,” Henry said. “Mum won’t wake up, and the other doctor said I just have to wait.”

Ghost chuckled along with Soap who was now standing at the foot of Sandy’s bed.

“It’s all part of being brave still, Henry,” Ghost said.

“But this doesn’t feel like being brave, it’s just boring, and I have a stomach ache.”

Soap immediately diagnosed in his head that it was likely nerves. The collected Henry may not have been explicitly told that his mother may not wake up, but he figured Henry knew deep down there was a chance she could leave him alone forever.

“Listen,” Ghost said, a hand on Henry’s shoulder. “Sometimes the bravest thing we can do is nothing at all. I wish I knew that when I was your age. Just remember how much you love your mum and that’ll be enough.”

Henry processed that line for a moment before nodding his head, earning him another hair ruffling from Ghost.

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Ghost and Soap made their way to the elevator and waited to go down.

“You know,” Soap started, looking towards Ghost who was already looking at him with his signature gaze. “For someone keeping their distance, you really connected with Henry today.”

“Comes with the territory,” said Ghost, flatly. “Gotta be good with people in A&E. Are you good with people, Johnny?”

The nickname hit him differently than being called Soap. His mother used to call him Johnny when he was a kid, but he demanded to be called John once he reached secondary school. But hearing it from the burly man he was now working under hit his ears in a new, not-unpleasant way, and he decided to let it go.

“I like to think so,” Soap said with an awkward smile. “I guess you’ll just have to be the judge of that.”

“That I will,” responded Ghost.

Soap laughed. “I guess we can’t judge books by their cover here. You’re dressed up like you’re about to rob a liquor store but you’ve got the bedside manner of a saint...for the most part.”

Ghost let out a neutral “humph” as the elevator doors opened and they found their ways inside. Soap pulled out his personal phone and saw that Gaz was going ahead home. He responded that he was heading out now and would be there soon.

They silently made their way to the main doors out of the hospital. Soap hated an awkward silence, but he couldn’t help but feel a strange calm walking next to Ghost without talking. He looked over at Ghost a few times as they continued onward from the street towards rows of apartment complexes.

“Yer not following me by any chance, are you?” Soap asked a few minutes into their walk. “I try not to bring home guys I just met.” Soap dropped a hint out of habit, but wondered if he was subconsciously trying to signal to Ghost.

“I live right here,” Ghost stopped at a footpath towards a row of flats not as high as others around the street. “Good night, Johnny.” He made his way towards the building.

Soap stood there and just stared as the dark hunk made his way home. *So he lives right next to us, huh?* Soap thought, walking to the building next door.

He found Gaz on the couch of their two-bedroom flat's living room watching TV and enjoying a martini, bundled up in a throw.

"Started without you," Gaz said, taking a sip.

"Checked in on that A&E patient," said Soap as he sat next to Gaz and looked at his phone for food delivery options, realizing he was starving after not eating properly the whole day. "Kid is just sat there with child protection. Ghost was being a twat about not getting so close to patients, but he was just as in love with the kid as I was in the end."

Gaz swirled his glass around. "Using nicknames already?"

"Everyone calls him Ghost," Soap paused for a moment. "It's not like that."

"And how sure of that are you?"

Soap was now mindlessly scrolling on his phone, distracting himself from a feeling he did not want to deal with so soon after meeting a new coworker.

"Doesn't matter," said Soap, "He's practically my boss."

"But not ACTUALLY your boss," said Gaz as he shifted, pushing the tips of his toes on Soap's thigh to tease him.

Soap huffed. "He does live next door."

Gaz put down his drink. "OK, time to check the map."

Soap rolled his eyes. The map, being Grindr, showed anyone also on the gay dating/hookup app who was close by. Soap couldn't help but disregard his own phone as he leaned over to peek at Gaz's.

"You think this is him?" Gaz held his phone towards Soap, finger pointing towards a profile that was simply a black square with a ghost emoji.

"It's on brand for sure," Soap said, his heartbeat quickening. Soap opened his own Grindr and saw the same black profile. Soap also noticed that he had a new view on his profile as of a couple minutes ago. He tapped the notification and was stricken by his most recent view being from the ghost emoji profile.

A text pinged on his work phone from Price: *Sandy woke up, neuro says she'll be fine.*