

Title: Ready To Ride
Author: Scribblesinink
Rating: Teen
Characters: Kozik
Word count: 4,152

Author notes: Part of the Two Brothers series, exploring the past history of Tig and Kozik's friendship. Thanks to Tanaqui for betaing.

Summary: The day Kozik has worked toward to for months has come at last: his bike is ready to ride. And with working wheels, he also has the chance to make another dream come true.

READY TO RIDE **By Scribblesinink**

Running his hands over the bike one last time to confirm all the nuts and bolts and lines were tight and secure, Kozik hummed under his breath. His heart was beating quickly against his ribs and he couldn't help the smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. In a few minutes, he'd be taking this baby out for her first ride.

Three months had gone by since Tig had loaned him the money and Bobby had taken him to Modesto in the truck to see the guy who had a Low Rider for sale. The bike had been in even worse shape than Kozik had prepared for: more rust than chrome, and covered in a thick coat of dried mud. Poor thing, she'd looked like someone had mistaken her for a dirt bike. On the other hand, she'd come as cheap as could be, with the seller practically begging them to take her off his hands and free up the space in his garage, so Kozik hadn't complained too much. The low price had also allowed him to spend what little savings he'd managed from his wages at Teller-Morrow on buying replacement parts for those items he couldn't repair, as well as pay for the sanding and chroming he couldn't do himself.

And now she was ready for her maiden voyage. He couldn't wait. Not only would she allow him the simple pleasure of riding again—his single run with the club a few weeks back had only whetted his appetite—but a bike of his own also meant freedom. Freedom to get around at his own pace, without begging for rides. More than that, she was his entry ticket to the club, something he'd decided he wanted almost as much as to simply ride again. He'd show the Sons he was worthy of the patch.

This day had seemed a long way off, though, when he and Bobby had first unloaded the bike after returning from Modesto. A few of the guys had wandered over, muttering in disgust at the heap of scrap metal. "Son," Piney had

wheezed, voicing everyone's opinion, "you been had. That thing is done for. You gonna need a damned miracle to bring it back."

Shrugging off the laughter that rose at Piney's words, Kozik had lugged the bike into a corner of the lot where he could work on her without being in anyone's way. And for the next eleven weeks, he'd spent every free hour at the shop working on her. A few times, Tig or Chibs had helped out, and Bobby had offered up advice. Some of his fellow mechanics put in an hour here or there when he'd needed another set of hands, while everyone and their uncle seemed to be keeping close track of his progress as he essentially rebuilt her from scratch. He'd scrubbed and scraped, soldered and screwed, polished and greased, until his back ached and his fingers were bleeding.

He hadn't cared about the pain or the exhaustion. The only thing on his mind had been the bike—and proving Piney wrong.

Now, leaning over the frame, he rubbed a faint mark on the tank with his sleeve. The effort proved useless; the mark was a superficial scratch in the dulled metal surface. He shrugged, abandoning the attempt to get rid of it. "Ah hell, sweetheart, a fresh coat of paint'll take care of that," he murmured.

Because, despite a new set of wheels bought with the money from the run, and the chroming he'd had done, his bike was still an ugly duckling compared to the gleaming black Harleys of Tig and the others. Kozik didn't mind; the important part was that she was road-ready. He drew in a deep breath. "Ready to roll, girl?"

"Dude. You talkin' to your bike now?"

Turning, Kozik found Gemma's kid hovering nearby, smirking with the overconfidence of a seventeen year old. Jax hung out at the club house all the time, and had even lent Kozik a hand once or twice with the bike. Cocky or not, the kid had a good eye for engines.

"Nah, this baby's got soul, buddy." Kozik patted the saddle lovingly. Nobody could spoil his good mood this morning. "Watch and learn."

Slinging a leg over the saddle, he started the engine. The bike vibrated into life between his thighs, telegraphing her eagerness up his spine. Kozik gave Jax a smug look. Wasn't the first time he'd had the engine going, of course. But this time, he'd do more than just test it was running okay. This time, he'd put all that horsepower to the use it was meant for.

Shifting into gear, he cautiously opened up the gas. The bike started forward smoothly and Jax had to jump out of his way. Kozik drew in his feet and went faster, veering out of T-M's gates, turning right on the road, and rambling around the block. The wind tugged at his hair and T-shirt, and he longed to take her

further, go faster, discover what she was really made of. Common sense held him back: while he was confident his repairs would hold up even at higher speeds, she was neither registered nor insured. He'd hate to run into an overzealous cop and have her impounded. No, best he stick to doing things by the book.

Ten minutes and two loops around the block later, Kozik bumped back up the sidewalk ramp into the garage compound. Sons, hangarounds and women had gathered under the club house awning, and everyone swung round to look at him as he rolled up. He even spied Gemma, propped in the doorway to the office, regarding him with interest. Tig was grinning, and so was Bobby, while Clay's face, as usual, gave nothing away. Jax must've run and told everyone what was going on.

Kozik slowed the bike, a wide grin breaking out on his face, pride and satisfaction surging through him. He stopped near the group and cut the engine. For a long moment, nobody spoke.

"Oi, brotha." Chibs broke free from the gathering and circled Kozik and the bike, eyeing it critically. "What's this, then?"

Kozik resisted the urge to rest a possessive hand on the handlebars and settled instead for a warning glower in the Scotsman's direction. At last, satisfied with his inspection, Chibs straightened, a smile on his face that deepened his scars.

"I'd say ye've performed a miracle!" he declared solemnly, purposefully echoing Piney's words of three months earlier. The group broke out in laughter and cheers, and Kozik let his glower fade, no longer able to hold back yet another toothy grin. "This calls for a celebration." Chibs slapped Kozik on the shoulder, hard, and shoved the bottle of Jack he had tucked under his elbow into Kozik's hands. "Drink up, laddie. Ye've earned it."

Kozik raised the bottle to his mouth, taking a long swallow and feeling the burn of the booze hitting the back of his throat. Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, he passed the bottle back to Chibs. As the crowd slowly dispersed, he caught Tig's eye. Tig gave him a barely perceptible nod.

Kozik's grin returned. Over the few past weeks, he'd dropped a number of hints in Tig's direction about his growing interest in the club. The camaraderie and easy trust between the Sons had reminded him a lot of the good times in the Marines—and he'd never understood how much he missed it until he saw something similar among Tig's brothers. He'd begun to understand why Tig had felt like going as far as buying a house after he'd joined Samcro.

Kozik hadn't quite dared come right out and ask Tig directly what it would take for him to become a member, though. He was unsure how deep Tig's wariness

about him falling off the wagon ran. In the end, he hadn't needed to bring it up: Tig had eventually picked up on his hints and mumbled that he'd talk to Clay. "Once you get that piece of junk up and running."

Kozik had kept his part of the unspoken deal: stay clean, work his ass off and get his hands on a working bike he could call his own. The small nod told him Tig hadn't forgotten either and would follow up on his end of the bargain.

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"C'mon." A few days after Kozik had taken his bike out for her first spin and Chibs had christened her *Miracle*, Tig called him over from the work bay where he was busy with changing the air filter on a pickup truck. Unsure what Tig wanted, Kozik wiped his hands and sauntered over, picking up his pace when Tig gestured impatiently.

"What—?"

Tig whirled on his heel and strode ahead into the club house without a word. Shrugging, Kozik followed. Under the curious eyes of a couple hangarounds playing a game of pool, Tig headed across the room, aiming straight toward the room known as the chapel, which Kozik had understood was strictly off-limits. Tig wasn't looking left or right, and certainly wasn't paying any attention to the hopeful smile from a brunette in a low-cut, skin-tight pink top. His whole demeanor made Kozik feel nervous.

Reaching the door of the chapel, Kozik found Clay sitting in the chair at the head of the table, slowly swiveling it back and forth, one hand resting on the carved surface in front of him. He didn't look up as Kozik hesitated on the threshold but simply commanded, "Shut the door."

Growing even more nervous as he realized the curt order hadn't come from his daytime job boss but from the president of the Sons of Anarchy, Kozik scrambled to obey while his heart jumped into his throat. A summons to the chapel could only mean one thing: Clay was about to tell Kozik his future. Would he allow Kozik to prospect for the club? Or would he dash his dreams for good?

Kozik shot a quick frown over at Tig, who'd taken the chair at Clay's right hand. He'd have appreciated a heads-up, a moment to prepare, both mentally and physically. Sweaty and with his hands streaked with engine grease didn't seem right for the seriousness of the moment.

Christ, did the abruptness of this summons mean Clay had decided to turn him down...?

Instinctively falling back on his military training, Kozik kept his eyes focused

somewhere above Clay's right shoulder, resisting the temptation to look around even though he was burning with curiosity to examine the club's inner sanctum. He'd caught glimpses of the interior whenever the doors were left open, of course, and spied the redwood table with the carved reaper in the center, the coveted chairs surrounding it, and the banners and plaques on the walls. *Brains before bullets*. He liked that. But he'd never been inside before .

"So." Clay lifted a cigar out of the box on the table in front of him and studied it. "Tig says you wanna be Samcro?" He still didn't look at Kozik.

At least that wasn't a straight up "no". Taking heart, Kozik swallowed. "I am—do." Dammit, he felt like a raw grunt called up before the CO. Up until now, he hadn't fully realized just how important having a shot at joining the club was to him. *Don't fuck this up, man*, he told himself. He might not get another chance. And then he'd never be more than another mechanic riding a Harley.

Clay lit a match and held it to the cigar, drawing deeply on it. He finally raised his gaze to pin Kozik with a hard stare. "You stayin' clean?"

Kozik darted Tig another quick look. The question, and the fact Tig had apparently told Clay everything, startled him. Tig gave a half-shrug, his meaning clear. *Full disclosure, dude*.

Well, he guessed it made sense. He was no fool; he knew the club was about more than innocent fun and games. He stiffened his spine and met Clay's steely gaze head on. "Yes, sir." He caught the quick wordless exchange between Clay and Tig as Clay briefly glanced at his sergeant, but failed to read it. Had he said the right thing? The wrong thing? "Six months now."

He was suddenly aware he was standing at attention. Catching himself, he stuffed his fists into the pockets of his jeans. From the faint twitching of Tig's lips, neither the movement nor its meaning had gotten lost on his old Marine buddy.

"Hm." Clay took another deep pull from his stogie, tilting his head back and releasing the smoke in a long stream. "Anything else I need to know? Shit from your past that could come back to bite us all in the ass?"

"Ex-girlfriend and a Bronze Star?" Kozik quipped, nerves getting the better of him.

Clay's brows drew down and he fixed Kozik with another pale glare. "Don't get flip with me, kid."

"Sorry. No, there's nothing."

Club president and sergeant-at-arms traded another look.

"I trust him," Tig said. He spoke softly, but hearing those words, Kozik had to fight to hold back a grin. This was neither the time nor the place to let on how much Tig admitting out loud he trusted Kozik meant to him.

"Hm." Clay leaned forward to tap the cigar into the ashtray in front of him. "We'll put it up for a vote Friday."

Kozik opened his mouth to thank him, but Tig forestalled him with a flick of his hand, a silent, "Go. Go."

Snapping his mouth shut, Kozik swung sharply on his heel. But as soon as he was outside the chapel, he couldn't bite back a grin wide enough to make his cheeks hurt. Probably looked like a loon, but he didn't care.

"Good news?" The girl in the pink top was batting her lashes at him.

"Yep." He didn't elaborate. Probably wasn't supposed to tell her anything. Besides, he didn't want to jinx it: Clay had only promised to put it to a vote; the club could still say no. And blabbing to a random chick about what had been said to him in the chapel definitely wouldn't earn him any favors.

The girl beamed an inviting smile at him, but once it became clear he wasn't gonna tell her anything else, she drifted back to the pool table, while Kozik finally got his feet moving and went back to the truck he'd been working on.

Nothing more he could do until the club's vote.

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Bright Saturday morning sunlight stabbed at Kozik's eyes as he trudged outside, an unopened can of beer in one hand and his brand-new and still stiff leather cut creaking on his back. He was hoping a little hair of the dog and some fresh air would banish his headache; the bathroom cabinet had been miserably empty of painkillers, and not even the weight of the leather on his shoulders could fix that.

He scrunched his eyes to slits against the brightness, willing his head to stop pounding, and popped open the beer. After swallowing a gulp, he filled his lungs with air. Despite the agonizing glare of the sun, it was definitely better out front than inside: Tig, who, as his official sponsor, had possibly been even more thrilled about Kozik getting his prospect patch than Kozik himself, had never made it past the living room, where he'd collapsed in a snoring heap on the sofa, reeking of booze and pussy and old cigarettes.

Missy had followed Kozik out and was now trotting ahead as Kozik dragged

himself across to his bike, which was parked near the end of the drive. She looked back hopefully from the sidewalk, obviously expecting to be taken for a walk.

"Sorry, girl." Kozik propped himself sideways on the bike's saddle, putting a boot on the footrest. He took another drink, letting the cool beer flow down his gullet. "This is as far as I go. Maybe later."

Finally accepting he wasn't going to come with her, despite her giving him her saddest whine, Missy began to explore the yard instead, sniffing at the shrubs and rooting through grass that was yellowing with the onset of summer.

Kozik took another deep breath, closing his eyes completely against the sun's glare, and yawned. It was far too fuckin' early to be up. But he'd been too wired to be able to sleep for more than a few hours, despite the many celebratory shots he'd thrown back last night. He reflexively ran his free hand down the front panel of his cut, drawing in the new-leather smell. "Guard this with your life," Tig had impressed on him, as he'd draped it over Kozik's shoulders after the club had voted in his favor. Kozik hadn't been entirely sure if Tig was joking or not, so he'd nodded earnestly.

He had no intention of losing the cut, anyway. Between the clues Tig had given him and what he'd seen himself from the sidelines over several months, he reckoned he had a pretty good idea of what he'd had gotten himself into. The next year would be tough as hell while he went through Samcro's version of boot camp—and he wanted it to be. Wanted to make full patch on his own merit and not, as Tig's friend, riding on his coattails. Paying his dues as a prospect would be the only way he could—should—earn the friendship and brotherhood he was looking for. The only way his brothers could be sure he'd have their back as they'd have his.

He let out an ironic snort. It was exactly like being in the Corps. Minus the endless drills and random politicians deciding what shithole to send him to next to die in, but otherwise identical.

Missy let out a *whoof*, startling Kozik from his thoughts, and a small voice cried, "Hiya, doggy." He pried his eyes open far enough to see the boy from across the street—Robbie, he remembered—come running up on little red sneakers. Kozik hadn't seen much of the kid or his mother over the last months, busy as he'd been fixing up Miracle.

"Hey, little dude." Kozik smiled down at the boy, who was giggling and cringing as Missy shoved her wet nose into the crook of his neck. "How ya doin'?"

Robbie didn't answer, too busy fending off Missy to pay any mind to Kozik. Looking up, Kozik saw his mother—Emily—standing next to the family sedan,

watching them both. She offered Kozik a smile and a nod as she met his eye, before putting the jackets she was carrying into the back of the car. Then she crossed the street toward him. Presumably to get her boy and take him back.

Kozik finished his beer, crunched the can between his hands, and tossed it onto the stoop, to throw into the trash later.

"Mornin'," Emily called out cheerily.

Kozik tilted his head at her in response. Thankfully, the beer had done its job and his queasiness was fading, as was the hammering in his skull. "Going on vacation?" He nodded across at the car, where Emily's husband was now trying to cram a large suitcase into the trunk.

"Yeah. We're going to visit Lloyd's mother, down near San Diego. Mind keeping an eye on Robbie for a bit while we finish packing?" She flapped a hand at her son. Missy had run off to chase a butterfly and Robbie was now squinting up at Kozik, his thumb stuck firmly in his mouth.

Kozik grimaced, not sure he was in any state to be trusted with babysitting duty. Then again, how long could it take to pack the car? And it wasn't like he had anything more urgent to do than sit here and enjoy the sunshine while he waited for the last of his headache to fade. "Okay." He leaned down to ruffle Robbie's hair. "Wanna sit on the bike, little man?"

Robbie's face lit up with delight and he pulled out his thumb with a sucking noise. "Can I?"

"Sure." Kozik hopped off the bike, grabbed the child under the arms and swung him up onto the Harley's saddle. Robbie squealed, frightened at being so high up, but the fear quickly faded from his expression and he pursed his lips and began making *vroom-vroom* noises. Kozik chuckled. "We'll make a biker out of you yet."

Emily laughed. "Thank you." She half-turned to go and then paused, a thoughtful furrow forming between her brows. "That's new." She indicated Kozik's cut; she must've noticed it as he lifted Robbie up.

"Sure is." He puffed up his chest a little. "Got it last night."

"Lloyd's gonna have a fit." Emily raised a hand to her mouth, smothering a laugh. "He already hates the motorcycles, but wait till he finds out you're both in that gang now—that's what it means, right?"

"Club," Kozik corrected automatically. "And yes, it does. You got nothing to worry about, though. Gangs are full of gangbangers doin' all kinds of bad shit.

We ain't like that." It felt damned good to be able to say 'we', though he didn't bother to explain to her he was merely a prospect; she wouldn't understand the finer points of prospecting versus full-patch. Hell, he wasn't sure he'd gotten it all himself, either. "So what's his problem with Samcro?" Kozik gestured over at Lloyd, who was shooting him a black look while lugging a second suitcase out of the house.

"He thinks you're all criminals. Says the police should have everyone arrested."

Kozik smirked inwardly—Lloyd was shit out of luck on that one, considering the club was doing protection runs for the chief of police—and raised his eyebrows in her direction. "And what do you think?"

"Dunno." Emily offered another shrug. "You seem nice enough. Fixin' our window and all."

"Damned right. We're just a bunch of guys who like hangin' out and riding Harleys, is all." He huffed out a wry laugh. "Not like we eat babies for breakfast."

She giggled. "I know."

"Em, Robert, come on," Lloyd called. He was striding toward them, beckoning to his wife and son. "You know Mother'll start worrying if we're late."

Emily threw a quick glance in Lloyd's direction, before turning back to Kozik. "Sorry. We should go."

"Sure. Shouldn't keep your old man waiting." Kozik grabbed Robbie to set him back down on the ground—and caught him just in time, just as he was about to slide down by himself and likely crack his head open on the concrete. "Whoa, easy there, mini-man."

Unaware of the near-miss, Robbie toddled off toward where his father was waiting impatiently. Missy trotted after them and Kozik had to call her to fetch her back. She gave him a sad look but did as she was told, settling down next to Miracle with her tongue lolling and tail whipping.

"I don't want you to talk to those people," Lloyd hissed at his wife, loud enough for Kozik to hear. Kozik didn't think that was accidental. "Either of you. God knows what could happen."

"But—," Emily started to protest. The rest of her words were lost to Kozik as Lloyd snatched her elbow and steered her toward the car, while giving Kozik the evil eye over his shoulder. Kozik shrugged. He couldn't give a shit what the guy thought of him and Tig. Dude was a dick.

"What's all the racket?" Tig's grunt behind Kozik was thick with sleep.

"Apparently your neighbor doesn't like us very much." Turning his back on the street, Kozik laughed as he caught sight of Tig in the doorway. "Christ, bro, you look like week-old pizza." Tig's eyes were bloodshot and slitted against the sunlight, his hair a mess, and his T-shirt stained and creased.

"Oh, really?" Tig scowled at Kozik. The scowl would've been more impressive if he hadn't yawned at the same time. "At least I'm not struttin' my shit in front of that uptight pussy from across the street. Hop to, *prospect*, and fix me up some coffee." He rubbed his brow. "And find me some fuckin' aspirin."

Rolling his eyes inwardly—so this was what it was gonna be like?—Kozik ambled over, bumping Tig aside with his shoulder when Tig blocked his way and refused to move. Tig might think he was laying down the law, but as far as Kozik was concerned, coffee was just the ticket. And— he grinned to himself as he made his way to the kitchen and the coffee maker—he certainly wouldn't mind making a trip to the store for painkillers.

After all, any excuse to ride was a good excuse.

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