Steady, As She Goes

by auspizien

Summary

Zoro Roronoa is a retired black-ops agent suffering from PTSD; after moving to a small town and getting married in hopes of leaving that life behind him, a chance meeting with a smarmy, blond paramedic changes all of that. Thus ensues a summer of tempestuous desires, heart-wrenching decisions, and unforeseen espionage.

[Modern AU. ZoSan. Slow Burn. Artwork included.]
Find Yourself A Girl

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Steady, As She Goes

by auspizien
A dull hum echoed throughout the small briefing room from the bright luminescent lights stationed across the ceiling, their flickering rays causing Zoro to keep his brow furrowed as he glared at the two men sitting across from him. The shadow cast across his face creating an aura of disdain as neither agent seemed unnerved as they both watched the slow thrum of Zoro’s fingers tapping across the metal table with weary trepidation.

Upon being called into the room Zoro had immediately known what it was about, and made no effort to conceal how thoroughly annoyed he was about the whole situation. The younger of the two men had begun fumbling through a tired explanation as to why he was there, and throughout the entire monologue Zoro had remained stoically silent. Left hand having come up on the table and beginning its tapping the moment he had taken a seat.

“Find yourself a girl.” The other man offered casually, leaning a bit further back in his seat as he stared down at Zoro as he waved a dismissive hand. Not the least bit perturbed by the murderous glare that the man gifted the agent with, sitting far too confidently in his finely pressed suit for Zoro’s liking.

“Settle down.” The other agent added with a shrug from where he sat adjacent to his coworker, “Live a simple life.”

Zoro continued to silently watch both men, gaze shifting back and forth between them as a rage had begun to coil in his chest at the notion of being forced to retire. Both men acting as though it wasn’t absolutely belittling to be in his position, to have lesser men tell him he was the one that was no longer of use. Stare darkening as he bit his tongue to refrain from saying something scathing he might regret.

“In a... quiet town.” The first man amended, rising to his feet as he adjusted the front buttons on his suit with an arrogant shimmy of his shoulders, “Preferably.”

A silence stretched between them interrupted only by Zoro’s increasingly aggressive taps as it seemed both men had finally concluded what they had been sent in to say and now awaited a response. The first still far more comfortable in close proximity with him than the second man was;
visible line of sweat forming on his brow as he watched Zoro tensely as though expecting a sudden strike.

“So, that’s it?” Zoro grunted finally – the first words he had spoken since entering the building – hand finishing its tapping as he continued to refuse to break eye contact with the two men that were clearly getting increasingly nervous being in the room alone with him, “You're done with me?”

“Not at all.” The second man reprimanded, obviously attempting to abate any rising anger that might cause Zoro to act out, “Think of this like your well earned retirement.”

A low growl permeated from his throat at the utterance of the word as the hand on the table slowly retracted to ball into a white knuckled fist. Eyes darting to level on the second man that now seemed to be on the verge of wetting himself as Zoro repeated murderously, “‘Earned’?”

The man stammered pitifully before the first stepped forward once more, towering over Zoro as his head blocked out the main light that had been illuminating him. Turning his glare onto the other man, Zoro was more than a little chuffed at the lack of reaction as he had already begun picturing ways of eviscerating the agent with the pen from his breast pocket, “You've served your country, Roronoa. You've done your duty; it's time to move on.”

“So I'm useless now?” Zoro clarified darkly, “Is that it?”

“Hardly.” The first man scoffed, shaking his head almost regretfully, “However, your time has run its course, and let's face it; that incident in Prague was not a fluke.”

“That was--”

“You're done, Roronoa.” The first man cut him off firmly, “You know this...”

Zoro's eyes slowly slid shut against the painful truth that he had slowly been forcing himself to ignore the past several months. Each mistake, every mishap, all of the incidents slowly leading up to one inevitable conclusion that he had known would come but had prayed he would never have to face. Anger deflating from his body in wave as cold defeat began inching up his legs before slowly enveloping him whole.

~X~
Eyes sliding open, Zoro stared up at the canopy of his bedroom with a weary gaze as his hand reached out blindly to the side to snag the alarm clock on the bedside table. Twisting it towards himself as his head fell to the side, he noted the time with dismay as sleep still continued to elude him. Setting the clock back down as softly as he could, his hand falling away as he remained lying on his back for several long moments and listened to the steady rise and fall of the blankets as his wife slept soundly next to him.

The sun was still a couple hours from rising and – despite the years that had passed since his employment – he just couldn't shake his habit of waking before dawn. Every morning it was the same, and every morning he lay in bed for several minutes trying to go back to sleep before eventually giving up and getting out of bed. And just as every day he soon found himself resigned to not going back to sleep.

Blinking slowly, he reached up a lazy hand and pulled the blankets aside and stood, making sure to not disturb the sleeping woman as he made his way downstairs. Trading his boxers for a pair of shorts, he stumbled his way into the basement where his workout area was set up and in the early dawn shining through the window he began with his daily routine.

Starting with the weights first as he threw several plates on the bar and began completing a set of reps on the bench; going until his muscles stung, his arms shook, and he could barely get the bar extended. He would then drop it onto the catch hooks and force himself into a seated position, letting himself recover for several minutes before doing it once more. Continuing this cycle until he had completed enough sets, and then racking the weights and turning his attention to the punching bag in the corner.

For the next several minutes he would punish the leather with unwrapped hands as the sting to his knuckles helped to keep him grounded and release an iota of the insurmountable frustration that had been trapped within him the moment he had been forced to retire. Pounding punches after viscous kicks he would attack it until his breathing was hoarse and sweat dripped into his eyes before finally pushing himself away with a resigned grunt.

Giving himself only a moment of reprieve, he would then turn to the bar hanging across the middle of the room and set about finishing up his workout with various pull ups, and hanging sit ups. Going until his body would literally be unable to complete another repetition before finally dropping to the floor and stumbling his way upstairs into the early morning.

Upstairs, he downed a glass of water before pulling on his running shoes and sternly focusing on each precise motion as he tied the laces. Each loop and pull of the lace memorized as the attention to each minute detail helped to keep him grounded, kept his mind focused on the present. Pushing himself to his feet, he snagged his light weight sweater on the way out the door and pulled it on
before taking off down the street at a steady jog.

Down the block, past the playground, out of the subdivision and into the park. Each morning the same route, the same footsteps pounding underneath him, the same foot falling with surety as he rounded a bend along the winding pathway. Past the elderly couple that were always out for their morning walk at the same time, giving them a curt nod as he ran by and off towards the lake.

Forcefully keeping his mind from wandering during the dull activity as he fought to keep his thoughts centred on all that was accosting his senses. Paying careful notice to the vibration through his sneakers with each pounding stride, the twisting motion of his upper torso as he ran that caused the fabric to rub against his waist, the flicker of fabric around his thighs as his shorts bounced in rhythm.

It was the little things like focusing on the expanding of his chest with each heaving breath, and noting the distinct colour of the leaves on the bushes that morning that kept his mind from straying to torrid territory. Absentmindedness was a catalyst that caused his thoughts to divert back into old memories that should remain hidden; flashes of the past that were detrimental to his recovery.

For the past three years he had practised his self-control with an obsession to the point where he had nearly full control over his episodes. However, despite his resolve it didn't stop them from happening completely and he had become at a loss for what to do. Accepting that his former life was over was something he had never fully expected he would have to do; even when he had been forced to retire he had stubbornly believed he could over come this just like everything else he had. That one day he would be back working.

More infuriating than anything was no matter what he did he couldn't seem to fix what had been broken; how was he supposed to fight when the very thing betraying him was his own mind?

Already finishing his lap of the large park he found himself running back through the subdivision as he berated himself for allowing his thoughts to stray into the negative. Knowing his therapist would tell him not to dwell on it, but unable to stop the occasional pessimism from slipping into his musings. Slowing his pace as he neared his house, he walked the last few blocks as he began thinking about what to make for breakfast.

Entering the house, he kicked off his running shoes and made his way upstairs and back to the bedroom, his wife still sleeping soundly in bed. Quietly divesting himself of his sweaty clothes, he tossed them in the hamper and made for the bathroom just off their bedroom. Turning on the shower and giving it a few seconds to run hot before stepping under the spray with a soft grunt of relief.
Standing completely still he left the shower spray beat water down on his head as his eyes slid shut and Zoro focused on remaining calm despite the darkness. Letting his mind go blank even as he continued to focus on the small sensations riddling his body; each drop of water pounding against his skin, the cool tile under his feet with the edges of grout that scraped the soles of his feet, and the suffocating steam that blanketed his lungs like a humid blanket.

Eyes slowly sliding open, water clinging to his eyelashes as he stared balefully at the tiled wall ahead of him as he tried to locate a semblance of emotion beyond his dreary fatigue and frustration. He had remained in this tiring cycle for so long he no longer felt the urge to break from it, nor knew what he was supposed to do otherwise. Even if he made a full recovery the sad truth was that he would never be allowed in the field again; this was his life now.

Stepping back enough to allow the water to hit his chest, he ran a lethargic hand through his hair that had the green strands springing forward once his hand passed over them and flicking small droplets of water forward. The frustrating thing was not that he disliked his life, it was simply that it wasn't the one he had thought he would be living; he had always assumed he would die in his line of work and that would be the end of it.

How was he supposed to live a life he had never planned for?

Heaving a large sigh he stepped out of the shower and snagged a towel from the rack to swiftly dry off his hair before lowering it to his face. Scrubbing the soft cotton across his exhausted face before angling his head to the side and gently patting his life ear dry to avoid hooking the fabric on the three golden rings that pierced the skin at the lobe. Lowering the towel to quickly dry off the rest of himself, he paused as his eyes fell across his tattered body that was a macabre reminder of everything that had happened to him.

Hand raising out of instinct to rub at the scar running the length of his torso, he paused with his fingers hovering over the skin as his eyes traced every long laceration that had become a silver scar, and each bullet wound that had healed into a faded starburst of healed tissue. Letting his hand fall away he took a steadying breath to force himself to not reminisce on the memories associated with each wound as he turned away from the mirror and only briefly catching a glimpse of his unmarked back.

Quietly going through his closet, he got ready for the day and was soon downstairs and dressed just as he heard the stirrings from the woman upstairs that he had called wife for the past two years. By the time he was done making breakfast, his wife was making her way down the stairs dressed and ready for the day; impeccably dressed as ever and her long blond hair swaying about her in an elegant array.

Neither of them had to work. It had led to Zoro's increasing frustration as he searched for an outlet to
channel his passion, and caused his wife to spiral into a pit of boredom that had led to some unsavoury activities. Worse yet, Zoro was entirely aware of what she was up to. However, it was unspoken between them that he knew what she was doing, and that she knew that he knew; and they both pretended that she didn’t.

“Thanks for breakfast, sweetheart.” She cajoled happily as she swooped by him with a cup of coffee in her hand, delicate fingers coming up to gently touch his chin as she rose to give a soft kiss to his cheek. Her dainty lips far softer than any worn, or calloused part of his aging body as they pulled away with a soft noise.

Zoro only nodded minutely, giving her a soft smile as he watched her walk away and ignored the hickey that was barely concealed by the collar of her blouse. Not bothering to ask where she was going for the day as he began dealing with the dishes before also heading out the door to occupy himself for the day.

~X~

Car pulling up to the local animal shelter, Zoro made his way up the serene walkway as he could already hear a chorus of howls and yipping inside from the many fosters. Yanking open the first door as he made his way inside the place that he had been volunteering at for the past year at the suggestion of his therapist. Removing his dark leather jacket and placing it on the coat rack, he idly adjusted the collar of his shirt before opening the second entry door.

“Conis.” Zoro supplied with a curt nod as he stepped inside, closing the secondary door behind him as the odorous concoction of urine and septic cleaner accosted his nostrils; luckily he had smelt far worse things. Remembering how his therapist had been urging him to engage as he forced out awkwardly, “How’ve you been?”

“Good, thank you.” She simpered happily, rising from the desk and coming around to greet Zoro properly, “We got a new drop off today; I was hoping you could get a feel for her?”

Zoro just nodded in response, allowing her to lead him into the back where all the kennels were located and standing uncomfortably behind her as she unlocked the door. Holding it open for him she gestured inside, “Kennel seven; Wado.”

“Alright.” Zoro managed softly, and Conis just smiled and released the door for him to walk through before leaving him to his devices. They didn’t speak much but Conis understood most of what Zoro tried to say without having to vocalize it which had been a huge relief to the man.
At first she had been a little weary of the hulking man that had come in and fumbled through a conversation about volunteering, but she had very quickly come to realize and understand his situation. He had been relieved to not have to explain it to her, and she seemed to just be happy that someone volunteered as often as he did. Neither bringing up that half of the time Zoro spent with the dogs was almost certainly more for his benefit than theirs.

Zoro had never wanted to admit to needing a service dog after his retirement, but the gentle contact with the animals had helped him greatly when dealing with his diagnosis. It was something he had loathed admitting to his therapist since she always had this infuriating ability to always be right; she was abrasive but no one else would probably be able to handle him if he was being completely honest.

Making his way down the hall, he regretfully passed by several dogs that he was well acquainted with that got up eagerly as they saw him approaching. Giving pause to dote a little on each as he passed their cages, murmuring apologies for not being able to focus on them today. As he rounded on kennel seven, it took a moment to notice the older dog sitting near the back but when he did he couldn't stop his gaze from softening at the sight.

The dog in question was a beautiful. A long, elegant body that was lean from years of care, her fur a gorgeous white that gave her a pure, regal look, and sharp, calculating golden eyes that sparked an air of aged wisdom around her. In all his years he had never really seen a dog that appeared so ethereal before. At first she was a little weary, but curiosity got the better of her as she slowly began edging towards him.

She came up to the cage cautiously as he crouched down to be on her level, offering the back of his hand through the links as she butted the knuckles with her golden nose and sniffed curiously. At closer inspection Zoro was actually able to note a honeyed golden hue to certain spots on her coat that weren't visible from far away, making her appear even more gorgeous up close. It wasn't long before her amber eyes were glancing up at him with an innocent air that reassured Zoro to her docility.

Pushing himself to his feet, he unlocked the cage and slowly stepped inside. Still keeping his motions slow and non-threatening as he once more dropped to a knee and held out a hand as he waited for her to come to him. It took a lot less time to earn her trust than some other dogs did, and within minutes her head was being nudged into his chest as she requested more scratches to her ear.

Chuckling softly, Zoro ran both hands down the sleek neck as he reminded himself to focus on the feel of the fur under his palms, tilting his head to meet her eyes as he murmured, “You're beautiful.”
It was met with happy, guttural bark as she got more bold and put her paws in his lap to climb further into his arms. Zoro actually letting a laugh out at her boldness as he continued to test the water by stroking his hand down the length of her back. After several more minutes of acquainting himself he found her trust in him reassuring enough to take her out and see how she reacted when around other people.

“Wanna go for a walk, girl?”

A resounding wooing howl was a certain yes, and he pushed himself to his feet to go grab a leash for her. Once she was properly secured and ready to go, they made their way out of the kennel and off towards the entrance to the shelter. Wado keeping in tame step at his side; her stride patient, graceful, and calm. She was clearly a very well trained dog; either she was given up because the owner died, or they had thought the dog was too old. Regardless, it was a shame that such a beautiful dog was left here.

“I'm taking her out.” Zoro informed simply as he passed by the front desk, Conis glancing up from her paper work as Zoro continued, “I'm going to gauge her sociability.”

“Awesome. Thank you Zoro.” Conis chirped, “What would I do without you?”

Zoro just gave nervous smile and an embarrassed shrug as he held open the door for Wado and led them outside and down the sidewalk towards the main area of town. Merryville was a fairly small city with a respectable population and main hub with most of its amenities within it; the rest of the subdivisions and locals lived outside in the beautiful sprawling hillsides that made the whole area a quiet, rural community.

At first Zoro had been adverse to moving somewhere so small, but it had eventually grown on him as it had begun to feel like a surreal piece of heaven outside the horrors of the real world. Even after three years it still felt like he had come to live in a dreamland that couldn't have possibly been part of the world he had experienced for the first thirty-two years of his life. And despite his internal struggles, it hadn't stopped him from appreciating the beauty of the place.

Getting onto the main street that stretched the length of the small downtown area of the city, they continued down the sidewalk at a careful pace as Zoro kept himself calm and in turn Wado matched his relaxation. People walked by as she remained completely unperturbed, and even when a few stopped to gaze at her beautiful coat she didn't get at all nervous. Zoro let a soft smile crook his lips as he couldn't believe how well trained she was.

Nearing the end of the street, they approached one of the local coffee shops that was dog friendly
and decided she was well behaved enough to venture inside. It was also just hot enough outside that getting her some water before heading back was probably the least he could do.

“Okay, big test now girl.” Zoro murmured softly to the dog, pulling open the door to the shop and stepping inside. Wado followed behind perfectly, and when Zoro stopped in line to wait, she took a seat on the floor beside him with the gold tinged paws placed elegantly between her feet.

After snagging a coffee for himself, and a water for Wado, Zoro guided them back outside as he set down his own coffee and poured some water into his palm to let her lap it up, continuing the action until she eventually lost interest and Zoro was able to dump the rest and toss the empty cup into a nearby garbage. Picking up his own coffee, he turned to make his way back down the main street towards the shelter when he found himself jolted out of reality with a sudden jerk.

A sharp crack echoed out across the street and it had a slue of vividly painful memories flashing behind his eyes with a visceral force that had him gasping and reality warping. Sensations of pain lanced through him leaving him breathless, and concussive wails of bullets echoed in his ears before managing break from it. When everything faded and he was back on the sidewalk, he glanced around for a confused moment before realizing it had just been a car back firing.

It took another moment to realize his hand was held aloft with nothing in his grasp and as he looked down at the paper cup on the sidewalk and the coffee splattered across the pavement, he had to grit his teeth to refrain from yelling in his frustration. It had been three months since he had an episode; he had thought he had been getting better...

Wado began to whine nervously and Zoro guiltily realized his anger was beginning to cause her to become anxious. Stooping down, he cradled her face in his palms and he shushed soothingly, forcing his demeanour to return to normal as he focused solely on keeping himself steady and reassuring her.


After several moments she eventually calmed, but when he opened his eyes again to look up at her there was a curious concern in the depth of her eyes that Zoro was met with. Shoulders dropping in self directed defeat, he kept one hand on the leash as the other ran through Wado's fur one last time as he met her stare with a baleful apology.

“That's a bummer.” A voice intoned from behind him, causing Zoro to glance sharply over his shoulder at a lean man stopped behind him. Dressed in bright blue scrubs with his blond hair tied back in a messy topknot, juggling what had to be at least nine coffees in his arms.
Pushing himself up to his feet slowly, his eyes ran the length of man as he was able to note a slight darkness under the man's eyes along with some stubble that had formed along his jaw and chin that was in need of a shave. The charming grin overshadowed the slight scruffiness however, as Zoro fought his nervousness to respond and gave a shrug while he muttered, “Slipped.”

“Ah, classic butterfingers.” The blond intoned with a nod of understanding – his voice a heady timbre that was friendly on the ears – blowing a strand of free hair out of his face before oddly angling his elbow towards Zoro, “Take one of mine.”

Zoro just stood staring at the man for a long, confused moment as he tried to figure out why a nurse would be handing out coffees to strangers on the street. When the blond cocked his eyebrows earnestly and once more jerked one of the many coffees at him Zoro finally found his voice, albeit quietly.

“I'm fine.” Zoro murmured, immediately regretting the possible rude underlying tone as he quickly tried to amend, “They're clearly for somebody.”

“Eh, coffee run.” The man shrugged passively, “I always buy extras; there's always somebody who didn't order anything but wants to have something the moment I arrive. It's just damage control.”

Zoro didn't know what the blond expected in response, and just continued to watch the eccentric man calmly as he berated his lack of ability to create small talk. Never really knowing how to respond to such random statements beyond apologizing or just giving a nervous laugh and agreeing. Most often he opted for silence which caused people to become unnerved and assume he had issues; his therapist was still trying to get him to work on that.

“Seriously,” The blond urged seemingly not the least bit affected by Zoro's silence, this time with a humorous tone that also clearly stated that he wasn't going to argue about it, “Take one; you'll be doing me a favour and lightening my load.”

Zoro glanced down at the dog at his side, not sure what help he was expecting from the canine before glancing up helplessly and meeting the blonds vibrant blue stare. Finally giving a short nod and reaching out for the nearest cup that was precariously balanced in the middle of the coffee tray and not really held in place by anything.

“Thanks.” Zoro mumbled, holding the drink awkwardly at his side suddenly very much aware that he wasn't sure what was the correct way to hold his arm at his side that didn't appear robotic.
Eventually deciding on snugly at his side with a perhaps too-tight grip on the flimsy paper cup.

“Don't mention it.” The man nodded before continuing off down the sidewalk, arms still laden with a ridiculous amount of beverages as Zoro assumed he was making for the hospital several blocks away. Watching him walk for several moments as he was still baffled at the man's charismatic ability to strike up a conversation with a stranger so confidently. Trying to contain his small hint of jealously before making off down the street, Wado at his side.

~X~

Back at the shelter, he made his way inside with timid steps as he still wasn't able to shake the self-hatred that had begun to swell in his chest at the scene that had taken place downtown. Wado had calmed considerably but was still on edge as she undoubtedly sensed the frustration radiating off of him in vexing waves. Having to remind himself to relax his tense grip on the leash every couple minutes.

Once inside, he gave a short wave to Conis whom smiled cheerfully at his return, “ How'd the walk go?”

“Good.” Zoro responded tersely, knowing he should make more of an effort to continue the conversation and perhaps detail some of the things he had noted about Wado, but currently couldn't be bothered. Still far too irritated at himself to worry about his therapists wishes.

“I have some forms for you to fill out on her before you leave, alright?” Conis asked softly, “Just so we have some information on her.”

“Okay.” Zoro commented stiffly, sweaty hand retracting and releasing the leash in his grip several times before finally murmuring softly, “I'm gonna spend some time with Kitetsu before I leave...”

A worried expression graced her delicate features as he could see her intention to rise from her seat in concern at the mention of the temperamental dog. She was always gracious enough to never mention – and to never ask – about any of the issues that plagued him, but it hadn't stopped her from figuring out that he had begun to rely on some of the animals whenever he was in particularly rough shape.

Innocent, yet intelligent eyes wandered over him critically before she seemed to rethink her initial reaction as her hands stilled on the arms of her chair. Pausing in the motion of rising as she gave a curt, understanding nod and added gently, “I'll have a pot of tea ready for when you're done.”
Zoro simply nodded gratefully and then made for the kennels, putting Wado away as he bid her a final goodbye with a couple last loving strokes before making his way down the hall and towards the more secluded areas. Carefully undoing the latch on one of the off limit cages, he made his way over to the far wall where a young mutt waited with dark eyes and a hardened stare.

Dropping down heavily onto the floor, he let his legs sprawl out from under him as the tempered canine edged towards Zoro carefully, eventually crossing his paws and lowering himself down to the floor. Letting his head rest on Zoro’s thigh calmly as Zoro placed a hand to the dog’s back, giving a heavy, reassuring pat before letting his hand lie still as he stared blankly ahead of himself in morose defeat.

Hours passed as he sat in the kennel with the mute dog whom he had always connected with above all of the others. Maybe it was because neither of them were sociable, or perhaps even hostile at times, but Zoro felt that the most likely reason was they both had a past that made them untouchable. And it could be ridiculous, but from the moment he had first met the feral dog there had been something painful in its eyes that Zoro had understood implicitly.

Letting his eyes fall shut he allowed himself to drift off lightly, knowing that naps were far safer territory for him as he tried not to dwell too hard on the events that had transpired. Brows furrowing as he stomped down an ache of hopelessness in his chest that constricted his breathing and made his muscles seize. Once again faced with the horrible reality that this battle with his memories was one he was never going to win.

~X~

Closing the door softly behind himself as he returned home, he slowly trekked up the stairs and divested himself of his clothes and found a ratty pair of sweat pants. Making his way down the hall as the initial frustration from earlier that day had once again faded to become a part of swirling miasma of defeat that had taken control of him for years now. Compartmentalizing the reality of his life as he entered his den and flicked on the light with a weary hand, glancing around balefully as the sudden brightness glinted tantalizingly off of the many jars stationed around the room.

Another crutch his therapist had forced upon him in hopes of helping with his recovery, an attempt to give him an outlet despite ignoring the very obvious issue of his disinterest... initially. It had been hobby that had taken a while to gain a knack for – though part of his defiance was simply his small joy at disobeying his therapist – but he had eventually taken a liking to it and was now actually fairly fond of his projects.

Dozens of jars lined the walls of the small room, each lit up gloriously with the sun from outside to
illuminated the vibrant array of colours from each ship within. Some massive jars with a gorgeous warships, and others, impossibly tiny, with a small vessel; each done with intricate detail as Zoro's patience had grown and skills had become honed. The pride and joy of the collection still placed high on a shelf above his desk so it was the first thing that caught your eye when you entered the room.

An average sized jar, but the ship inside was like none of the others he had created before as he had spent several months on it trying to get it perfect. A small, sturdy vessel that he had begun making after seeing a design in a children's book and adapting it; making it a much more intimidating ship. It was also the only pirate ship in the collection and he was especially proud with the detail to the horns on the figurehead of the ram.

Taking a seat at his desk he began working on the ship that had been the object of his devotion for the past several weeks as he was still in the process of prepping it before putting it inside the bottle. Having spent almost two full weeks trying to get the carving of the figurehead correct before mulling over which paints to use. It was now about time for him to start working on the mast and sails, which he had been putting off for quite sometime as he had a knack for always accidentally breaking the mast.

Sliding his chair forward, he snagged the pair of round spectacles from the work bench and placed them on his nose as he set about pulling out all the items he'd need to begin creating the sails. Keeping his mind pinned to the task at hand as minutes dissolved into hours and the sun faded from the window as he was just finishing the stitching on the first sail when he distantly heard the front door open as his wife returned home.

When she eventually made her way upstairs and into his den, Zoro said nothing as he noted her clothes and hair were obviously dishevelled, and continued to remain silent when she pulled him from his desk and dragged him to the bed room. He didn't even say anything when she pulled him down into the blankets for a greedy kiss and he could smell a pungent cologne of another man quite obviously hovering over her.

This is how it had been for months; this was how it was going to stay...

TBC...

Chapter End Notes

Prompt was the song "Steady, As She Goes" by The Raconteurs; it became an idea for a multi-chapter that I haven't been able to get out of my head. The only reference to the
song is the first scene; the rest of the fic will have no reference to the song. Thank you.
Old Habits Die Hard

Taking the stairs with silent, confident strides Zoro glanced down at the watch donning his right wrist as the other hand remained occupied with the large case in its grasp. Noting the time as he rounded the final flight onto the floor that was required with only five minutes left until he needed to be in position. Ducking out of the stairwell onto the floor and making his way down the deserted hall.

Entering a prearranged apartment, he softly locked the door behind himself as he made for the window situated in the bedroom that would allow for the best angle. Keeping himself out of eyesight he cast a careful glance through the window and across the large courtyard that separated the illustrious apartment complex from the ambassadors palace. If the intelligence that they had was still viable then the man that was marked would be in the dining room of the west hall at precisely this time.

Dropping down to one knee, he flicked open the clasps to the sleek black case before flipping the lid up and began assembling the matte parts with practised ease. Eyes glued to the building as he easily attached the barrel of the rifle with nimble fingers, making sure not to loose sight for even a moment. Muscle memory guiding his hands along the gun as he assembled the final few components before moving into position.

Hand flicking the stabilizing arms down, he placed the barrel of the gun along the sill of the window as he edged forward carefully to catch sight of the building through the scope. Fiddling with the knobs on the side with micro-millimetre movements as he calculated for distance, wind, and other interference until he had a perfect view in through the window on the second floor. Sniper jobs weren’t his area of expertise, but it didn’t stop him from still being one of the best at it.

A single buzz of his watch announced the arrival of the political figure and as though on cue stepped in front of the window and into Zoro’s sights. Without removing his sights from the man, Zoro dug into his pocket and pulled out a small device, flicking it open and placing it on the sill. Eye darting from the scope to the small anemometer to take into account wind speed and variation every other second as he await for the man to get into position.

Slowing his breathing to nearly undetectable levels he watched through the scope as he was able to discern details on the man's face with incredible detail. Watching as he chuckled heartily at a comment made by one of the other men before turning to face someone out of sight as he presented his back directly to the window.

Hands steady as always flexed in preparation as his finger finally lowered to the trigger just as a tightness started to develop in the centre of his chest. Branching outwards in small pulsating waves that began restricting his lungs and caused his breathing to grow short as a grunt of pain wheezed
past his lips. Eyes falling out of focus for a few important seconds as he found himself choking on the air around him as a terrifyingly familiar memory hovered beneath his subconscious that had him taking in panicked gasps.

“Zoro?” A voice barked into his earpiece, the word drawing him back into the moment with rigour as he blinked furiously to shake the ill feeling, “What the fuck are you doing? Take the shot!”

Swallowing thickly and pushing the odd moment out of his mind he gazed back into the scope in horror as he found the target stepping away from his line of sight and just beyond the window. Eyes flickering to the anemometer and back before realizing he was far too late to worry about semantics as this was his last chance for the shot. Counting the steps in his head as a cold sweat broke out across his body while he slowly swivelled the rifle to compensate for the movement of the other man.

Readjusting the barrel to aim at the next window as he waited for the man to reappear as he pointedly ignored the shrill wailing of the commander in his ear as he once more flexed his grip, released a slow breath, and then pulled the trigger just as a shape stepped into front of the window. A barely noticeable cracked hissed across the large courtyard as a faint shattering of glass could be heard just before screams could be discerned.

Coming back on his haunches Zoro took a last look through the scope to see the shattered window and the lack of a man standing before it as shadowy figures of politicians rushed to the aide of the shot man. Hefing the gun up to rest the butt against his thigh, he kept a hand on the barrel as he looked out towards the large building with a small smirk.

“What kind of bullshit do you think you’re trying to pull, Roronoa?” The voice growled angrily in his ear, “Not everything has to be a game!”

Raising his free hand, he pressed on the earpiece before speaking softly, “I got him, didn’t I?”

There was some brief muttering as the man no doubt didn't have a proper response before finally grunting, “You don't need to show off every time.”

“Sure thing, boss.” Zoro grunted with a smirk, releasing the microphone and setting about dismantling his gun. Methodically taking it apart and replacing each piece back into its respective place inside as he tried to shake the weird feeling that had refused to abate at the thought of the strange breathlessness that had just occurred moments before.
Zoro's eyes flickered open with the same weary urgency that they always had, hand reaching out blindly for the alarm clock in a motion that he had now completed countless times. Once again met with an earlier time than he should have before giving up with little reluctance and climbing out of bed. Going downstairs to partake in his daily routine without so much as a look of indifference over the tasks; workout, shower, and breakfast.

Several weeks had passed with the same routine remaining as uninterrupted as it had before, once more managing to keep his episodes at bay. Days fading into weeks as the only thing that gave Zoro any note to the passage of time was the changing of the seasons, or the arrival of monthly bills in the mail, far too used to his mundane routine to attempt to change it.

Wife already gone for the day, Zoro wearily slipped on his shoes and shucked on his jacket before stepping outside into the cool morning air and took a slow glance around. Summer aromas drifted across the light breeze as birds chirped happily in the wee hours of day break, a calming grey overcast shut out the blue sky but still left the area humid. Heaving a sigh, he decided he might as well walk into town as it didn't appear like the weather would turn to rain.

The walk was fairly short, and significantly mindless as Zoro filled the time with mundane tasks such as counting the lines in the sidewalk, or noting all the different flowers present along the neighbours gardens. Specifically focusing on trying to remember the names of each to keep his dreary mind active; not allowing it to stray towards memories that would forever haunt him.

It wasn't long before he had reached the centre of town and he was making his way up the stairs of the small medical building just off of main street. Zoro stood balefully outside the door leading into his therapists office as he tried to prepare himself for the taxing events that would no doubt take place. Knowing it was for his own good, but hating how drained he felt afterwards; never really able to comprehend how talking about himself was somehow more exerting than scaling a thirty storey building.

Hand coming up to run through his hair in exhaustive acceptance, he placed his other hand on the knob and pushed inside firmly. Met with the familiar warm glow that he had become accustomed to over the past several months, eyes drifting from the leather lounge chair in the middle of the room to the more posturepedic one positioned off to the side that currently had his awaiting therapist sitting in it.

“Mr. Roronoa,” She greeted with a cool tone, crossing one elegant leg over the other as her hands remained clasped over the clipboard in her lap. Sharp, calculating eyes watching him as perceptive as ever as she offered warmly, “Good afternoon.”
Zoro nodded stiffly, making his way into the small office as he managed thickly, “You too.”

A fine brow was raised at Zoro critically and the man refrained from making a face of infuriation as he made for the chair opposite the intuitive woman. Sitting down with a little too much force as he made eye contact with her and tried congenially, “Good afternoon, Ms. Nico.”

“Why thank you.” Ms. Nico noted with an airy smile, completely ignoring the withering stare that was barely concealed on Zoro's face as she continued to watch him intently, “How have you been?”

“Good.” Zoro grunted, attempting to sink lower into the chair as he prepared himself for a long, torturous hour. While he could leave any time he wanted, Ms. Nico – Robin – had an aloof way of making him unable to leave without feeling like he was losing to her. A trait which made him both loathe and respect the woman to an unbelievable extent. “You?”

“Quite well, thank you.” She mused calmly, eyes never straying from where they locked unnervingly onto Zoro's own as she continued lightly, “What have you been up to?”

“Nothing new.” Zoro lifted one shoulder in a lame attempt at a shrug, matching her gaze tiredly as he vaguely wondered how a therapist in a small town could have a more intimating aura about her than some of the world's deadliest assassins; she would have made a remarkable villain.

“Sure?” Robin coaxed knowingly, and Zoro had to refrain from growling in annoyance at her perceptiveness. Not that he was entirely hiding the fact that he was sulking, however coming into her office always immediately reminded him of all of his failures and issues over the past month.

“I had a moment.” Zoro admitted gruffly, eyes staring at the floor as he scowl in self-berating frustration. Still not quite over what had happened a couple weeks ago, and unable to shake the feeling that he had failed in some way. It hadn't even been a fully fledged memory but it had still shaken him enough to cause him to drop his drink; being distracted like that in the field would've wound up with him dead.

“Tell me about it.” Robin coaxed soothingly, always gently aware of how much these moments affected Zoro, but also stern enough to force him to face them. Zoro floundered for a moment as he fought to figure out how to begin, and Robin simply leaned minutely back in her chair to give him the time needed.
“Car backfired.” Zoro explained eventually, trying not to focus too hard on the memory lest it jar something loose again, eyes falling to the arm rest as his fingers picked at the leather with intent focus, “It only lasted for a couple seconds.”

“Take me through it.”

Zoro refrained from groaning in annoyance and raised an exhausted hand, pressing his fingers and thumb against his closed eyes and rubbed at them with dismay before finally dropping his hand and levelling the woman with a defeated look. It was hard enough committing to coming in here once a month and opening himself up to her, and sometimes having to be forced to relive experiences was not his idea of a pleasant afternoon.

“I was out walking a dog.” Zoro began simply, eyes respectively raising to meet hers as he kept his senses attuned to the stiffness of the leather underneath him. Focusing on the slight creak of the fabric to keep himself present so he hopefully wouldn't relapse as he recounted the event, “Went and got a coffee when the car back fired. It wasn't really memories, just flashes. Darkness. Pain. Gunfire...”

At the last word Zoro raised a hand and numbly rubbed at an old wound unconsciously, feeling an ache deep beneath the skin that had long since healed. A memory started to rise and he dropped his hand swiftly, eyes snapping back to the woman in the opposing chair as he sternly forced the memory from his mind and back onto the present and concluded simply, “Dropped the coffee.”

“I imagine that was a little frustrating.” Robin offered softly, her tone consoling.

Zoro just shrugged before grunting, “It was like two dollars; I'll live.”

Robin just watched him flatly for several long seconds as they both knew that that had not been what she had been referring to, and they also both knew that it was Zoro's lame attempt at deflecting a conversation he did not want to have. She must have been in a more lenient mood today as she let the comment slide and instead of prodding with more questions offered an insight instead.

“That is progress.” Robin noted softly, “You haven't been having many full memory incidents lately.”

Zoro shrugged.

“That isn't something to shrug off.” Robin urged sternly, her body still relaxed even as her tone
gained a bit of an edge, “Slow progress is still progress; you need to focus on your triumphs.”

The woman had an excellent point. Robin was actually always brimming with wonderful insights and ideas, most of which Zoro had to begrudgingly give her credit for. Three years ago he had been a mess of insecurities, trauma, and anxiety, but through their sessions he had come to evolve into a relatively functioning adult. Through her guidance he had managed to take back a large portion of his life, but despite his gratitude she never seemed to understand what was truly causing him suffering.

All the therapy in the world couldn't fix the small, significant fact that the life he was fighting to obtain with her wasn't even the one he wanted. She had him working towards this idealized fantasy of normality when all he wanted was to be back at work, back at what he was good at. Every iota of his being craved being apart of his former life of espionage, expect for his memories which seemed intent on thwarting him.

“I still can't sleep well.” He finally offered into the silence, his inability to sleep just another failure stacked onto the ever growing pile that was his suburban life.

“But you sleep.” Robin corrected, glancing down at her notes briefly before turning a much softer gaze onto him. “When you first came to me you hardly slept; you had nightmares. Now you sleep a regular six hours and haven't had a nightmare in months.”

“Still can't sleep eight.” Zoro offered petulantly.

“I may have you working towards eight hours, but you are also the type of person whom clearly does not like to sleep that much.” Robin noted, “Just because you haven't done what I suggested doesn't mean you haven't succeeded.”

Zoro didn't respond. Simply letting her insightful words sink in much like he always did every visit; of course she was right. She was always right. His grief wasn't with her, or with his progress, it was with his seemingly immature inability to let go of the past and simply be happy in his life now.

“You know what I think?” Robin mused, drawing Zoro out of his thoughts to refocus his attention back on her. Watching wearily as a few dust motes floated heavily across the sun piercing through the office window, offhandedly noting that the sun must have finally broken through the cloud cover.

“You'll tell me anyways.” Zoro grunted.
“You're too used to following orders.” She surmised simply, a frown breaking out across Zoro's usually stoic face at the words that she always seemed intent on bringing up every once in a while. A theory that no doubt had some merit, but also one that Zoro loathed to hear.

“You hear me say that I want you to do this, or that, and you take it literally.” Robin explained, as she could quite obviously tell from Zoro's scowl that he wasn't about to enter into this particular conversation, “This isn't some mission that you need to complete; this is your recovery.”

Zoro still refused to respond, and they sat for several long minutes simply staring at each other in what could only be described as a battle of stubborn wills until eventually Robin seemed to find something in his gaze that placated her. Looking away and down at the notes for a contemplative moment before addressing Zoro again much more congenially, “I think it would be healthy for you to pick up a hobby.”

“I do.” Zoro finally spoke.

“Something more tangible; something that can offer you a goal.” Robin explained as she jotted something down on her notepad, “Working out is mindless, and while I am very happy with your volunteer work and your model building, there is no finish line with that. You clearly thrive off of competition, and I think having something you can work towards will give you a good outlet.”

“You didn't like any of my choices before.”

“Before you weren't doing as well.” Robin countered, “I trust your judgment now.”

“Alright.” Zoro finally conceded, eyes flicking to the clock on the wall in relief as he noted his time was up and pushed himself out of the chair, simply relieved that the session was over for at least another month. Making for the door as he ignored the obvious annoyance gracing Robin's elegantly beautiful features at Zoro leaving without being excused.

“Think up a list and we'll discuss it next time.” Robin ordered as she watched him stride across the room, “And Zoro?”

“Hm?”
“Just because you don't succeed; it doesn't mean you've failed.”

The words impacted deeper than Zoro wanted to admit, so he simply nodded in understanding as he made for the door, one hand finding his pocket as the other opened the portal in his dreary excitement to get out of the room. First foot falling out of the room and back into the waiting area as the rest of memory they had been discussing was suddenly brought back with a warming clarity.

Hand pausing on the frame as a fragment of the memory struck him and it had him turning back to look at the woman with words hovering in his throat. She was still watching him intently, and at his hesitation raised a thin brow in invitation. It took several moments to find his voice, but when he did he uttered quietly, “There was something else.”

“Hmm?” Robin intoned curiously.

“When I dropped my coffee,” Zoro paused frowning at the memory as an odd swell of warmth bloomed in his chest, a sensation that he was not entirely familiar with and caused him to wince at the credulity of it, “A stranger gave me one of his.”

“Sounds very kind of him.” She noted softly. Zoro immediately not liking the way her calculating eyes seemed to read far more into his words than he himself could even begin contemplating.

“It was.” He responded shortly, defensive.

“Why did you feel the need to tell me this?” Robin prodded, her question almost seeming more for his benefit that her own as she continued to watch him closely. Zoro's eyes finally straying from hers to look down at the floor as a moment of introspection washed over him only to come up with nothing more than slight confusion.

“I don't know.” Zoro admitted quietly, frowning to himself as he shrugged, “Guess it just made me feel...”

“Happy?”

Zoro's gaze refocused as he tried not to contemplate on the feeling for longer than was necessary as he turned and made his way out of the office with a barely muttered, “Something close to it.”
Out on the street he made his way down the sidewalk and towards home, still mulling over everything he had talked about with Robin that morning. As much as he found himself stubbornly withdrawn during their sessions, he always felt relieved after she had managed to force him to open up. He knew it was for his own good that he continued to talk about everything going on in his life – knew that it was imperative to his recovery – but he couldn't stop himself from shutting down when confronted.

It could've been from the years of military existence, or possibly his fear over the reality of his situation, but whatever the reason he doubted he would ever find it easy to come to terms with what had happened to him and where he was now. This hadn't been the ending he had foreseen for himself, and now that he had to build it from the foundation up he felt at a loss.

Rounding the corner onto the main street that ran through town, he glanced up just as something began to feel off. Eyes falling to a young boy that was mid-step to wandering into the street, before darting up to note a silver truck heading down the road with little intention of slowing down. Light cast a reflection across the glass that flickered away for a moment in the wake of a shadow as Zoro only caught a glimpse of the person behind the wheel, but it was likely they hadn't seen the child.

Without even hesitating Zoro was darting across the street as fast as his legs could carry him, launching himself at the boy just as the truck neared and the driver slammed on the breaks a moment too late. Arms wrapping around the child, he managed to get his left up to cradle the head and his right around the body as they went sailing towards the sidewalk. Nearly out of harms way when the vehicle skidded into them and slammed into Zoro's right side sending the both of them sailing across the asphalt to land in a crumpled heap several feet away.

The boy in his arms was crying as Zoro tried desperately to get his bearings through the pain lancing through his right side, trying to blink through the stars that were booming across his vision. Keeping his hand cradling the back of the small child's head, he tried to ignore the poignant pain flaring up from his right arm as he continued to shelter the other even as everything had come a halt around them.

Memories like fleeting whispers tugged at all corners of his mind before another wave of pain managed to ground him enough to redirect the thoughts along another path. Pushing through to bring himself back to the present as he noted the rushing sound of blood in his ears that was to be expected and sensing people converging around them as he relaxed enough to release the sobbing child.

Rolling off the boy slowly, he eased himself onto his back as he gently curled his right arm into
himself to try and quell some of the pain flaring through it. The parents of the child were already rushing to check on their son as a crowd was beginning to gather and Zoro could vaguely hear someone on the phone contacting an ambulance. While Zoro was mainly concerned that the child was alright, he vaguely hoped he wasn't so messed up that he'd need to be taken away on a gurney.

Ignoring the clamouring around him, he instinctively fell into a military mind set as he began mentally assessing himself and confirming that everything was likely just external damage and he'd be fine enough to stand. A motion to his right had his eyes snapping up as the father crouched down next to him, making sure to not touch or move him until the paramedics arrived, but still wanting to assess him. Hands clearly hovering over Zoro in concern but panicking enough that he wasn't sure what to do as his eyes seemed fixed on Zoro's right arm in horror.

“Are you alright?!” The man asked nervously, eyeing him critically as his eyes kept drifting to Zoro's arm before back to him, the paleness of his face not a good sign for state of his arm. Zoro absently flexed his hand, relieved to find it worked albeit regretting the motion as a sharp wave of pain lanced up it afterwards.

“Fine.” Zoro grunted softly, eyes flicking over to the child that was still cradled in his mother's arms and wailing in terror, “How's the boy?”

“He's fine.” The father urged seriously, a slightly hysterical laugh barking from his chest as he seemed a little shocked that Zoro was concerned for the child at the moment, “Ambulance is on its way; you're probably in rougher shape than him.”

“The truck?” Zoro gritted through his teeth, finishing his mental assessment and deducing that it was totally fine for him to get himself off of his back and into a seated position.

“Driver took off.” The man explained, anger seeping into his tone, “No plates.”

“Probably stolen.” Zoro surmised with a hiss, placing his good arm under himself to slowly begin pushing himself up into a seated position. With only his right arm and shoulder damaged there was no need for him to remain lying on the ground, and it would make dealing with the paramedics easier once they arrived.

“Woah, woah.” The father put out a concerned hand, “You sure you should be sitting up?”

“It's okay.” Zoro reassured gruffly, getting seated on the curb as he finally cast a glance down at the
arm he held against his side. Noting with slight annoyance a jutting irregularity to the bone of his forearm and scowling, “I've had worse.”

The comment had the man's eyebrows climbing in concern as he was clearly interested to know what on earth could have happened to him to make him brush this off, however his questions were cut short as the wail of the ambulance came into earshot. Crowd parting to make way for the vehicle as many people still stayed to be able to oversee everything that was happening; the smaller town loving anything to gossip about.

Police were nearly on the tail of the ambulance, and as the officers went about getting statements a couple paramedics made their way over to the family and Zoro. A red-haired woman and young male with curly hair began assessing the boy and talking to the family as another man made his way over to Zoro, it wasn't until he was dropping to a knee in front of Zoro that he recognized the blond from several weeks ago.

“Hey!” The blond intoned with a reassuring smile, “Coffee guy! Fancy meeting you here!”

Zoro didn't say anything, once again not one for such trivial small talk as he watched the man with a calm intent, noting the subtle differences in his appearance since their last meeting. Looking remarkably less sleep deprived; he had shaved his face into a clean cut goatee, and his earlier mess of hair was cleanly tied back this time with only a few bangs falling in his face to obscure his left eye.

The nurse scrubs had been swapped out for a dark paramedics uniform that fit him snug, and as he placed a large red first aid box down on the ground next to him Zoro realized he had been talking. Glancing back up to meet the man's eyes as he grunted impolitely, “Huh?”

A small moue of concern twitched across the man's lips as he no doubt suspected Zoro had a concussion before asking again, “Name?”

“Zoro.” Zoro grunted roughly, before adding quietly for legality sake, “Roronoa.”

“Alright, Zoro.” The man nodded, “I'm Sanji. How're you feeling?”

“Like I got hit by a truck.” Zoro grunted thickly.

“Well, your sense of humour is intact.” Sanji joked playfully as he began to pull on a pair of latex
gloves and open the first aid bag he had brought with him, “Can you tell me what happened?”

“Kid ran out onto the street; driver wasn't paying attention.” Zoro summarized shortly, gaze flicking around as he was beginning to more clearly take in the scene around himself. Cops were now taking statements from the parents of the child and while the crowd was thinning he recognized a few faces of people in town he vaguely knew, “I tackled the kid out of the way, truck hit my right side.”

“Alright.” Sanji noted calmly, having already begun a basic check of Zoro's vitals to ascertain that he didn't need to be immediately rushed to the hospital. Zoro complied with everything easily, knowing he was fine but also aware things would go quicker if he just let the other man do his job, “How about your head? Neck? Any pain?”

“No, that's fine.”

“Okay, well I would still recommend coming back to the hospital so we can properly x-ray your side and see what we're dealing with.” Sanji requested simply, “If that's alright?”

“Figured.” Zoro shrugged his good shoulder, knowing that until they had fully assessed him they were likely going to treat him as though there was a potential he was dying. It wasn't long before another ambulance arrived to take the boy away to the hospital to be assessed and Zoro was loaded into the first one.

In the ambulance Zoro remained laying back on the gurney calmly, knowing he didn't need to be lying down but also knowing that it would make Sanji's job easier if he didn't make a fuss. Plus having his arm resting across his stomach was much less painful than having it hanging when he was sitting upright. Already calculating the severity of the break and knowing that he'd be spending quite a bit of time in a cast.

“Okay, Zoro.” Sanji continued calmly as he was still frantically reaching out adjusting straps and bars as the vehicle careened down the street at an unsettling pace, “I'm gonna have to cut your shirt off now to get at your arm.”

“Sure.” Zoro supplied, not at all concerned. Knowing that he had already bled all over it, and that most of it had become torn after skidding across the pavement. Luckily he was still in a very military habit of wearing identical cheap shirts that didn't hold any sentimental value to him.

Pulling out a pair of oddly bent scissors, Sanji nabbed the top of his shirt and began cutting the fabric
away with careful strokes. Getting down to the hem before turning to do both of the arms so they could fully remove the ruined bit of clothing, the front of the shirt falling open to expose his damaged body.

Zoro could see the muted surprise in Sanji's gaze as he noted all the scars and injuries that Zoro had collected over his torso throughout the years. Nearly uncountable bullet marks – some messier than others as he had had to dig a few out himself on missions – that decorated every part of his body, and numerous scars from blades and shell blasts. There was a particularly nasty one stretching from his left shoulder to his right hip that was no doubt distracting the blond the most.

Steeling himself for the conversation that was about to happen, Zoro watched as Sanji composed himself and an impassive mask slid in place as he turned his attention to Zoro's arm. Working silently to cut the rest of the shirt away and get the scraps of fabric off of him to get a better view at Zoro's injury. Relieved that he didn't have to explain himself, it seemed that Sanji's profession kept him from making any sort of comment on it.

It wasn't long before they were at the hospital and Zoro was being unloaded from the back of the ambulance and onto a large gurney to be wheeled into the hospital. A nurse with florescent blue hair had arrived to help Sanji and the other two paramedics to get him out of the vehicle, and as they eventually left to take the ambulance back to the station Sanji held back for a moment.

“Alright, Zoro.” Sanji consoled with a charming grin, placing a reassuring hand on Zoro's uninjured shoulder, “You're in good hands with Vivi here. She's going to make sure you're right as rain.”

Zoro didn't know what to say so he just continued to look up at the caring man with a calm expression until he eventually nodded and turned away. Giving Vivi a short wave before walking off to some unseen part of the hospital as Zoro was wheeled inside the E.R. and lost sight of him.

~X~

After numerous tests, x-rays, and hours spent hooked up to various machines they eventually deduced that aside from several fractures along his right side there was no serious damage. His arm would need to be heavily casted, as well as kept in a sling for several weeks as a fracture to his humerus would heal, but he was otherwise released with a clean bill of health. It had been about the same diagnosis he had given himself upon first impact, however he would be remiss if he didn't let the system do its job.

Back in the room that had become his temporary waiting area for the past couple hours he carefully struggled to put on a plain white shirt that had been provided by the hospital. A pained grimaced tore
across his face as he finally got his injured shoulder through the hole before managing to wrestle the rest of it on with little difficulty. Just as he was finishing tying his shoes and intending to go find a desk to check out at the door swung open.

“Hey!”

Zoro glanced up at the cheery baritone that chirped from the doorway as the blond paramedic from earlier made his way into the room with a paper cup in hand and a jovial smile on his face. Hair no longer tied up in a bun as it fell around his face in a wavy mess as he approached. No longer dressed in his work clothes as he held out a coffee as he laughed, “You're a tough one, aren't ya?”

Zoro shrugged, eyes flicking to the cup and back up at the blond, “Had worse.”

“So I was told.” Sanji snarked before jerking the cup at him, “Here; thought you could use a pick-me-up.”

“Is that a joke?” Zoro asked flatly, not entirely sure if the man was pretending like coffee was a proper remedy for being hit by a vehicle, or if he honestly thought some caffeine might do him some good. Giving his laces a final tug to make sure they were done up, he slowly rose to his feet to be on level with the other man.

“Could be.” Sanji shrugged, clearly not one to be perturbed by Zoro's brutish behaviour as he once more waved the cup in Zoro's face expectantly. It seemed to be a tactic that the man had discovered to work because Zoro found himself taking it from him soon thereafter and having a small sip.

“Why are you here?” Zoro managed after a moment, and Sanji seemed a little caught off guard by the blunt question. Zoro quietly berated himself as he tried to remind himself of how his therapist wanted him to remember most people were not used to his gruff comments; it was certainly part of the reason that after nearly three years in the small town he had few friends.

“Shift's over.” Sanji shrugged, recovering easily as it seemed he wasn't one to be scared off by grouchy patients. No doubt dealing with much more sour people on a daily basis, “Figured I'd see how you were doing.”

“’m fine.” Zoro responded, “Thanks.”
“Not the talkative type, are you?” Sanji noted with a shrug, that annoyingly cheerful smirk unable to be erased from his face as he began pulling on the jacket he had had slung over his arm. Not even bothering to wait for Zoro to respond as he jerked his head for the door, “Shall I show you the way out?”

Zoro just nodded politely and followed after the other man, silently grateful as he had a sinking suspicion that without help he would get lost in the confusing hallways. Down several corridors and an elevator they were soon at ground level as the blond asked, “Got someone coming to get you?

“Ah, yeah.” Zoro nodded shortly, the nurse on staff having called his wife and informed her of the incident a little while ago. “Wife.”

Sanji's eyes briefly flickered down to Zoro's left hand that was holding the coffee cup where the wedding band was prominently displayed before back as a warm smile broke out across his face and he offered sincerely, “Good to hear.”

Zoro didn't know what to say in response so he just remained quiet as he gave a short nod in agreement to the comment, hand uncomfortably fiddling with the paper cup in his hand. Sanji saved him from fighting to continue the conversation by giving a jaunty wave and beginning to make for the exit.

“It was good seeing you again, Zoro.” Sanji smiled, “Try not to get hit by any more vehicles.”

Zoro just stood awkwardly in the waiting room surrounded by numerous other patients waiting their turn to be seen as he watched the blond's retreating figure. That familiar warmth of gratitude at the stranger's actions once more causing his chest to constrict ever-so-slightly as a panicked urged wrestling itself out of his throat as he called after the blond with slightly poor timing, “No promises!”

Automatic doors sliding open, Sanji turned at the call and gave a cheeky wink before continuing off into the parking lot and out of sight but leaving the swell of appreciation behind. Not a moment later the doors slid open once more to reveal another blond whom strode in with a worried look on her face and nearly knocked the coffee out of his hand when she fell into his arms in a relieved hug.

~X~

The drive consisted of Zoro slumping low in the passenger side seat as he idly fiddled with some of the bits of casting material that were fraying around his knuckles as Kalifa fumed in the seat beside
him. Most of the words lost on him but only occasionally catching infuriated comments about reckless drivers, absentminded kids, and poor parenting. Zoro simply bit his tongue and when they pulled into the driveway didn't bother to ask why she wasn't getting out of the car.

Heading inside as he ignored the sound of the automotive pulling out of the driveway, Zoro wasted little time in treading upstairs and into their bedroom; carefully removing his clothing over the cast and sling that were now going to pose an additional annoyance in his life. Shucking off his pants with much more ease as he made for the bed and climbing under the covers, pointedly ignoring the shirt forgotten on the dresser that absolutely did not belong to him.

TBC...
Nineteen years of age delivered a scrawny, ignorant boy into the middle of a war zone; his excitement tangible and his thirst for action unquenchable. Eagerness lit up his soft face as Zoro was still several years from proper physical maturity, a trait that was shared amongst most of the new recruits. All headstrong without a morsel of humility to the dangerous situation they found themselves and the terrors that lay beyond their base.

A six month tour in a relatively safe sector had him returning with joyous intent before having his world shook as he experienced bloodshed for the first time. Getting caught in a bombing, taking part in a raid, watching as a fellow soldier triggered a land mind; laying face down in the dirt with ears ringing, body shaking, earth quaking as he looked up to see the pieces of what was once his comrade.

War had been hell.

Zoro shifted minutely from where he stood leaning against the wall, one leg propped up behind him as his gaze went hazy while he stared at the ground. Assault rifle held carefully in his still youthful hands, keeping the barrel angled lazily down as there hadn’t been a sign of danger for days. Taking his turn stationed outside an entry point to the base with very little excitement.

Hand releasing the barrel, he raised a finger to hook under the strap of his helmet and pulled down with a small jerk in an attempt to adjust it. Months spent out in the desert sun had gifted him with a rather prominent tan where the strap sat, having spent more time in his gear than out of it. Sand sat in every crevasse of his clothing and his teeth were forever marred with grit from the dry air.

“Hey Zoro?” A soft voice echoed in his ear.

Coming out of his daze, he raised a heavily gloved hand to press at the ear piece wired into his helmet before responding, “Yeah?”

“Can you come up to the watch for a second?”

“Roger.” Zoro muttered quietly, turning his gaze to the other soldier and giving a small nod to him as he headed inside. They had all spent enough time together the past few months that communicating through physical actions was mostly all they did now.
Weaving his way up the stairs of the make shift watch tower, he eventually arrived at the top and noted another one of his comrades kneeling carefully beside her watch spot. Edging over to where she knelt and taking the same position behind one of the barricades, he grunted softly, “What’s up?”

“There’s something weird in my scope and I don’t want to raise an alarm if it’s nothing.” Kuina explained quietly, proffering the larger rifle in Zoro's direction, “Could you confirm for me?”

“Sure.” Zoro took the gun, sitting the stock comfortably against his shoulder as he ducked down to gaze through the scope as he readjusted his sights in the direction Kuina had been investigating. Hand coming up to support the barrel as the other slowly retracted on the grip, “Where exactly?”

“The third hill; sparse shrubbery.” Kuina explained softly, “One large deformed looking bush.”

“Yeah, alright.” Zoro murmured, centring on the location as he kept himself low and hidden behind the rifle so that he remained out of eyesight of any insurgents, “Got it.”

“Kay, scan to the left.” Kuina ordered leaning in towards Zoro so she could look through the opening in the barricade towards the hillside she was talking about, “Doesn’t it look like there’s som--”

A loud crack echoed out across the hazy desert as Zoro felt the next few seconds pass in terrifyingly slow motion as he blinked heavily before turning his head to look over at his friend. The whistling which lasted less than a second rung out strong in his ears as it got closer and closer, and a solemn moment hung in the air as she turned to look at him as well.

Gaze meeting Kuina’s as he stared into her wide eyes just as the bullet came sailing through the opening in the barricade and penetrated the side of her head. The hauntingly slow motion ending in an instant as what had once been the head of a young, beautiful woman was now splattered all across Zoro's distraught face.

Several seconds passing as Zoro gazed down in horror at the limp headless body at his knees and the massive garnet pool that was forming near her still hemorrhaging esophagus. All matter of human material was soaking into his clothes as the faint taste of copper on his tongue made him aware that he hadn’t closed his mouth in time. Hands beginning to shake as his mind began to unravelled, all he could do was slump back against the protective wall behind him as he let out a shuddering gasp.
The ringing refused to fade and everything became blurrier until another soldier was on his knees in front of Zoro, yelling something he couldn't hear as strong hands grabbed his arms and began shaking him. Closing his eyes against the motion as it only continued to worsen before they snapped open again to be met with darkness, a foreign figure, and fear.

Adrenaline coursed through him and had him launching up at the man that was on top of him, all of his military instincts taking hold as the other seemed caught off guard by Zoro's sudden hostility. Not even putting up a fight in his shock before Zoro had him on the ground and his arm crooked into a painful lock as everything began to calm and the only thing echoing throughout the room was his harsh breathing.

“Fuck, Zoro.” A muffled voice grunted into the ground, “Let me go.”

It took several long moments to remember that what had just happened had been a dream and had to drag himself back into the present as he remembered the mission he was on. The mission and the man that was currently pinned underneath him that was his partner. Releasing him abruptly, he pushed himself away as he was still a little shook by what he had just done. Grunting quietly as he frowned to himself, “Sorry.”

“You okay?” Kohza grunted, pushing himself up and flexing his right arm with a wince across his face, “You were panicking pretty hard.”

“It's fine.” Zoro scowled, pushing himself to his feet with a hand to his knee for support and ambling back to his cot. Dropping down into it heavily as he kept his back to the man, “Go to sleep.”

“Sure.” Kohza scoffed, as a faint scuffling alluded to the man making his way back to his own bed as he bit out sardonically, “Lemme get right on that after I pop my elbow back in.”

Zoro ignored him, knowing that Kohza wasn't actually annoyed. as his own thoughts weren't on his partner or how bad he felt for attacking him in a sleep fuelled haze. It was on his dream and the subsequent memory that he hadn't dwelled on for nigh on a decade as it had been best to just bury it and ignore the trauma that had come with it. Unsettled at the newly recollected nightmare and the weird breathlessness that had accompanied it, hand pressing against his chest as a familiar pain ached deep inside.

~X~
Eyes snapping open, Zoro didn’t even bother with looking at his alarm clock as he carefully pushed himself out of bed and suppressed a groan of pain as the events of yesterday were finally catching up with him. All of the adrenaline and medication from the day before had effectively worn off in his sleep and his body currently ached in ways that it hadn’t since his former career.

Stumbling to his feet, he nabbed the bottle of prescription painkillers off the night table before hobbling into bathroom to relieve himself. After finishing, and washing his hands, he proceeded to pop three into his mouth and swallow them dry as he shrewdly looked himself over with distaste.

A massive bruise stretched the majority of his right side as the moulted skin had gained the coloration of a poorly mixed paint palette; reds, purples, and blues blotching across nearly half his torso. Attempting to move his shoulder did nothing as the muscles had effectively seized and upon further inspection the rest of his body was in nearly the same state. Every fibre of his body had contracted over the course of the night and refused to loosen.

Turning on the shower, he found a plastic bag to put over his cast before stepping under the hot spray with a relieved sigh, letting the scalding water massage his muscles and loosen them a minutia. Time ran away from him as standing was about the extent of his abilities at the moment until he was dragged back into reality when the shower door slid back gently and his wife stepped into the shower.

Offering her a small smile, she returned it albeit with a little more concern gracing her features as she gazed over the bruise with wide eyes. Moving a few steps over so they could share the spray of the water, he finally motivated himself to try and do something about the stiffness still riddling his body.

“Let me.” Kalifa crooned softly, hands coming up to gently caress Zoro’s shoulders as he let himself relax into her caring touch. Meticulous fingers dancing lightly across his back and shoulders as she slowly worked the tension from his body, each muscle at a time, leaving a cherished kiss behind before allowing her hands to stray lower.

Eventually she reached his hips, and she slowly slithered her arms around his waist as she stepped forward to rest her forehead against his back. Feeling the humid breaths in the cleft of his shoulders as he couldn't help but sink back into her with relief, as the complications of their marriage fell away and left only the foundations on which it had been built.

“Thank you.” Zoro offered quietly, the words an unspoken acknowledgement that she could let go of him now as he began properly showering for the first time since the accident. Halfway through soaping himself he glanced over as Kalifa was doing the same, soap bubbles and suds decorating her skin as her long hair hung around her shoulders as she ran a lathered hand over her thigh.
The wet blond hair starting a sudden spark in his gut that had him gathering her up in his arms and pulling her under the shower with him. Lips sealing over hers in a fiery desperation that continued to burn the fatigue from his bones and rejuvenated his muscles with a fervour that had before been unobtainable. Eyes falling shut as the last thing he saw was his hand tangling in gorgeous blond locks as he pulled her closer, the water washing a stream of suds away and down the drain.

~X~

Working on his sweatpants with one hand, he found himself taking the stairs back into the basement as his more nimble body was feeling much more capable. Stretching, a hot shower, and other certain activities had done wonders for his body as his routine seemed to have at least kept him in relatively the same shape he had been in before retirement. Though there was a stiffness to some of his joints that had definitely become more noticeable after he had turned thirty.

Most of his training would have to be modified for the lack of an arm, but it was easily compensated if he opted for doing a lot of leg training before finishing off with one-armed push ups and pull ups. By the time he had worked his left arm to exhaustion the last of the stiffness in his upper body had faded and he was beginning to feel like himself again.

Eventually making his way upstairs in a sweaty mess, he decided against going for a run while his arm was still freshly wounded and headed upstairs for a quick second shower. When finished and dressed, he began making for his truck as he decided to head to the shelter for the day; albeit a little late.

Making it barely a foot in the front door as Conis glanced up in greeting, head turning back to her work before she fully realized what she had saw and was jolting up from her chair dramatically. Scurrying out from behind the desk in a fluster, words catching in her throat as she ran up to him. Eyes only widening further as she took in his appearance and injuries much closer.

“Oh my goodness! Zoro!” Conis immediately chirped in horror, “What happened?”

“Car accident.”

“Y-You... I mean...” Conis stammered, eyes skirting from the cast on his right arm to the nasty bruise that was visible from under the collar of his shirt. He'd done his best to cover it, but it seemed he'd clipped his jaw in the fall a nasty bruise had begun to form there as well, “Oh my gosh.”
“Just a broken arm.” Zoro reassured softly, reaching out to touch her elbow gently to try to affirm the legitimacy of his claim despite how ugly the bruise appeared, “It looks worse than it is.”

“Half of you is a bruise!” She finally managed shrilly, flailing her delicate hands about wildly as she was clearly at a loss for what to do. Shoulders tensing up near her ears as she was quite obviously in far more distress than Zoro had thought she would be, “You're...”

A twinge of gratitude pinched in his chest as he found himself surprised at the unexpected concern she had for him, and almost feeling guilty for not expecting her to care as much. Smiling sincerely at her as he tried once more earnestly, “It’s fine.”

“Well... I mean...” Conis attempted hopelessly before letting out a long breath and conceding, “Okay.”

“Thank you.” Zoro offered quietly, hoping she could read his tone well enough by now to know how much her concern really meant to him at the moment. Casting a glance beyond her shoulder as he attempted to veer the conversation to much easier territory, “Who needs attention today?”

“You seriously don't need to come help today.” Conis insisted, “You should go home and rest!”

“I could use the fresh air.” Zoro argued calmly, glancing back down at her and adding firmly, “Please.”

Conis clearly still wanted to argue, but after wordlessly letting her mouth hang open as she tried to find a viable argument to use against him she eventually gave up. Mouth closing with a huff as she resigned herself to the notion that it was most likely for Zoro’s own personal benefit that he be allowed to help out. Grabbing her keys and heading for the kennels as she endeavoured to make light conversation.

“Most the of the pups have been walked today,” Conis explained as they made their way to the back, “Couple of the older one's too since it is such a nice day; Wado and Lassoo still haven't been taken out though.”

Zoro nodded faintly, “I'll probably take Wado.”

“She's taken a liking to you.” Conis noted with a smile, turning away to unlock the door to the
kennels. Pushing it open and holding it for him as he politely stepped past her as she continued, “She ate an hour ago; just keep an eye on her while out in the sun.”

“‘Course.” Zoro nodded in gratitude, and as Conis began letting the door fall shut offered a quick, “Thank you.”

Conis gave a soft smile before making back for the front desk as Zoro immediately made for the end kennel where Wado was waiting. Letting himself in as she scurried over to accept his welcoming strokes before her nose was sniffing his cast curiously; a concerned whine echoed in her throat as Zoro wrapped an arm around her to give a smothering hug as he hushed softly into her ear, “I'm alright, girl.”

His tone seemed to be enough to reassure her, but she still kept inspecting him with anxious snuffles as though she had to ascertain for herself that he was indeed okay. Nose nudging his bruised side a few times as he fought back a wince before she returned to sniffing his cast. Finally pacified, she began nudging his uninjured hand for him to pet her although she seemed to be more docile due to his injuries. Giving a few rewarding scratches to her ear for her good behaviour he murmured gently, “Shall we go for a walk?”

The mention of a walk seemed to divert her attention as her tail began wagging furiously and she jumped up onto all fours and yipped excitedly. Paws dancing up and down on the spot as Zoro pushed himself to his feet to go get a leash, unable to fight a smile as he began leading her out of the kennel and the building.

Being outside and doing a part of his usually mundane routine was oddly reassuring despite how much he usually seemed to trudge through it. However, walking the dogs at the shelter had always been a small ray of sunshine in his normally dreary retired life. Being able to still go down the memorized streets and feel the assuaging tug of the leash on his left hand had the thought of his injuries becoming fleeting notions.

Taking a bit of a longer walk than was normal, they ducked down a few side streets and bicycle paths as the summer weather beat down on them happily. Getting turned around a couple times before eventually getting back onto the main street and heading for the other end of town as he was beginning to notice Wado was getting tired. Making it a few blocks before they both stopped at a shout that echoed across the street.

“Hey!” A voice called out, “Zoro!”

Zoro turned slowly to glance behind himself, curious about someone calling his name when there
were very few people within that small town that even knew him. It took several seconds to notice the man making his way down the sidewalk towards him with a hand raised in greeting. A backpack slung over his shoulder, Zoro hardly recognized the blond when he wasn't in his work clothes.

Finally reaching Zoro, he grinned, “Fancy running into you.”

“Small town.” Zoro commented flatly, becoming more and more relieved that he didn’t have to feel guilty about his conversational tone around the other man. It was relaxing being able to not have to be tactful when he spoke lest he hurt someone’s feelings; Sanji never seemed perturbed by his lack of conversational skills.

“True.” Sanji noted as his eyes fell to the dog at Zoro's side, as Wado clearly recognized Sanji from their first timid meeting and this time was much more receptive to him as she was less riled up due to Zoro. Her tail began wagging happily as Sanji stooped down to run a soothing hand over her head and began scratching behind her ears, glancing up at Zoro as he asked, “What's her name?”

“Wado.” Zoro offered.

“Wado, huh?” Hands continuing their adoration as Sanji met her eyes and offered a cheery grin as he cooed playfully, “Well, she is absolutely gorgeous; the most beautiful little lady.”

A happy bark met the comment, Zoro watched as Sanji continued to woo the dog with compliments and hushed praises all the while nuzzling his nose against hers and practically burying his hands in her coat. She was amazingly receptive right away, and Zoro was once again a little saddened that such a well trained animal had been discarded so thoughtlessly.

“Is she yours?” Sanji asked absently.

“No.” Zoro shook his head mildly, “Shelter's.”

“Jeez.” Sanji scoffed as he flashed a grin up at Zoro before finishing off petting Wado with a few final ear scratches and pushing himself to his feet. Arms coming to cross over his chest as he raised a brow at him, “Walking shelter dogs and saving children; you're making the rest of us look bad.”

Zoro just fidgeted uncomfortably as he had no idea how to respond to the compliment, hand tightening and loosening on the leash in agitation as he realized his silence had left Sanji with no
where to go and effectively ended the conversation. Floundering for several moments before trying dumbly, “You save people every day.”

“Eh... It's not quite the same.” Sanji scrunched his face in contemplation, before giving a half-hearted shrug and changing the subject before Zoro had a chance to argue. The blond's gaze turning down to look at the casted appendage that wasn't in the sling like it was supposed to be and inquiring, “How’s the arm?”

“Healing.” Zoro commented firmly, not needing nor wanting a lecture from the nurse on how to properly take care of himself. He had been injured enough times in his life that he knew what needed to be done to heal, and he didn't need anyone nagging him about it.

“No signatures?” Sanji inquired as he looked over Zoro's cast in interest, completely avoiding the topic of Zoro's lack of sling altogether. Zoro was really beginning to appreciate the blond's tact and his intuitive ability to not comment on things Zoro didn't feel like discussing.

“No.” Zoro admitted, brows drawing together in slight confusion at the question.

“Well...” Sanji shook his head, frowning as he continued, “That just won't do.”

Shucking off his pack, he dug around in it for several moments before pulling out a marker triumphantly. Sanji gently took a hold of Zoro's hand and brought the arm in close as he began scrawling something across the top. Zoro stood awkwardly with his arm tucked into Sanji's chest, the blond's head dipped in front of him as he tried not to notice the fresh scent of the man's shampoo that accosted him.

“There ya go.” Sanji grinned, pulling away and capping the marker with finality, “Now you have one.”

Rotating his arm to look down at the note sketched into the cast, he found Sanji's name written with a curly sort of flair. At the end of the name Sanji had added a small little drawing that looked like an attempt at a fish, but had ended up looking more like a demented star with a smiley face on its arm. Looking up at the blond with a smile still touching the corner of his mouth as he murmured, “Thanks.”

Sanji just gave a cheery grin as he readjusted his backpack onto his shoulder and gestured down the street in the direction Zoro had originally been walking, “You headed back to the shelter?”
Zoro nodded.

“Do you mind if I walk with you?” Sanji asked politely, already taking a step but still keeping his body angled towards Zoro, “Hospital's that way too.”

“No.” Zoro shook his head, falling in step with the blond as they took off down the sidewalk, “Wado seems to like your company.”

“And not you?” Sanji accused with a mock hand of hurt placed across his chest, drawing back from Zoro with a ridiculous gasp of betrayal and a moue of disappointment. The man constantly had an unbelievably animated personality that bordered on embarrassing, but Zoro couldn't stop himself from enjoying it.

“You're alright.” Zoro offered simply, a small smirk quirking the corner of his lips at the blond's theatrics as he looked back down at Wado. Walking in front of them, her golden tail held high and wagging happily as she lead them down the street at a light pace.

“I get the feeling that's high praise coming from you.” Sanji mused.

Zoro just lifted a shoulder in response.

“Fine; keep your approval.” Sanji huffed playfully, still attempting an overly dramatic tone as he waved a flared hand at himself haughtily, “I can get validation else where.”

“Like a back alley?” Zoro muttered facetiously, eyes immediately widening in shock at his own words as he realized a moment too late that he had spoken them aloud; and to a near stranger no less. For some reason talking with the man had reminded him of petty banter back when he had been a soldier, the harsh quips just a usual aspect of every day life. However, this man was definitely not a soldier and he quickly glanced over at Sanji in panic, an apology was on the tip of his tongue as Sanji gifted Zoro with both eyebrows raised in shock before cackling wildly.

A biting grin flashing across his face as he snarked back, “Another joke? Seems you do have a sense of humour.”
Zoro just shook his head wordlessly; still appalled at himself for his behaviour and shocked at Sanji for his casual reaction to it.

“You're a funny guy.”

“I'm really not.” Zoro assured flatly, certain that everything Sanji was thinking as entertaining was simply his lack of coordination at navigating an average conversation. Although he supposed he would prefer the man think he was snarky rather than just an asshole.

“Well, this is me.” Sanji suddenly announced as they reached the next intersection and he jerked his thumb at the hospital in sight a few blocks away, “Doing anything this evening?”

“Well... I... uh,” Zoro floundered, not really wanting to accept as the lanes didn't exactly seem like the most conducive place to keeping himself in check. The loud crashes and cracking of the pins could nearly be as bad as a car back firing, and he wasn't exactly in the mood for having a panic attack in front of a bunch of people he didn't know. But he also knew his therapist would hit him over the head for passing up a social opportunity. “Sure?”

“Cool.” Sanji grinned, street light changing as he began crossing the street and called back to Zoro, “Meet at the lanes at nine?”

“Yeah.” Zoro agreed softly, touched by the man's offer but unable to shake the uneasiness of willingly walking into a place that was bound to cause him some form of trouble, “Alright.”

~X~

Pushing open the door and glancing around nervously, he already found himself consciously trying to count the number of tiles on the ground before he was spotted and his name was called out. Glancing up as Sanji sauntered over with a hand held high in greeting, the initial nervousness abated nearly instantaneously at seeing the familiar face. The crashes becoming a faint hum as the tension released from his body and he offered a small nod in greeting.
“Glad you could make it.” Sanji chirped happily, throwing an arm over Zoro's uninjured shoulder in a surprisingly friendly manner as he began guiding Zoro over to a booth at one of the lanes that the group had already occupied. Zoro remained in stunned silence as he wasn't expecting to be greeted so suddenly and in such an affable manner.

“Guys! Guys!” Sanji crowed loudly, obviously having to be obnoxious to properly get the attention of the people in the group as Zoro's casted arm was already beginning to sweat nervously as Sanji introduced him, “This is Zoro; I was telling you about him.”

Everyone turned in their seats as they watched the two approach while Zoro instantly felt unnerved having so many people watching him at once. All of them giving short waves of greeting and some of them nodding as their words were almost entirely lost under the music that was playing just a tad too loud over the intercom.

“Ah, right. Mr. Hero.” A man with eccentric blue haired noted with a jovial boast, turning in his seat and reaching out a hand to shake Zoro's in a hardy grip. Zoro idly noting the interesting stars tattooed onto both of his forearms as he looked down at the man and returned the firm handshake, “Sanji's quite the fan.”

Zoro released the man's hand and placed it to the back of his neck as he tried to fight down a flush of embarrassment, not entirely in the mood to talk about what had happened the other day. Immediately overwhelmed by the compliment, his normally horrible sociability absolutely floored with what to do as he could only manage a weak smile, nod, and a grunt in embarrassment. Smacking the man in the arm, Sanji snapped with a note of embarrassment to his tone, “Don't fluster him; he doesn't do well with praise.”

“Him and Chopper should get right along then.” An elderly man on the other side of the table noted with a chuckle, the comment causing a younger boy with brown hair and tan skin to duck his head with a blush. Another man at the front of the table began cackling wildly with a piece of pizza still held in his greasy hand.

“So.” Sanji mused, “Introductions?”

Zoro just gave a polite shrug.

“Alright; the walking dead there is Brook.” Sanji explained as he pointed to the older man that was still sporting a rather impressive afro for his age whose expression went flat at Sanji’s comment. The
blond ignoring it completely before rounding on the rest and pointing them each out in turn, “Usopp's the guy over there bowling, Chopper's the kid hiding in his beer, and Luffy's the guy that's eating half the pizza that was meant for everybody.”

There was some eye rolling and snide comments thrown Sanji's way that went unheard as the blond turned back to Zoro with his elbow placed firmly in the top of the skull of the man with blue hair and grinned innocently, “And Franky.”

An elbow shot out to catch Sanji in the gut as the blond doubled over with a wheeze before rounding on the man in an attempt to get him back. Everyone else however completely ignored the two bickering men as they each formally gave their name and offered to shake his hand. Zoro began reaching out towards the hand offered by the younger man named Luffy before he jumped out of his chair abruptly with a loud gasp.

“How’s that on your cast?” The younger man bellowed excitedly, pizza dropping forgotten to his plate as he watched Zoro far too intently as Zoro glanced down. Taking a moment to note the name scratched onto the plaster with realization before looking back up at the boy that was still gazing at him eagerly.

“Sanji signed it.”

A loud gasp was torn from him as a look of pure, unbridled excitement lit up his face, already half way around the table as he exclaimed, “I haven't signed a cast since high school!”

“Um...” Zoro floundered, not entirely sure what the hype was but managing with a confused moue, “You wanna sign it?”

“Yes!” Luffy shouted loudly, properly out of his chair now and darting over to Zoro's side before he even had an opportunity to question where the boy had been hiding a marker. Allowing his arm to get reefed aside as the excitable man set to work on signing the cast.

Zoro spent the next several minutes getting tugged around as each stranger practically put his injured arm in a lock to get a turn to add their own creative masterpiece. Some of them were more sincere than others and the young man whom had signed his name as Luffy had taken up nearly half of it to draw an incredibly childish, yet surprisingly vivid scene of him punching a dragon in the face.

Once the excitement had finally died down and everyone was going back to take their seats; Zoro
took a quiet moment to look down at his arm. Noting each name with its own individual flare and feeling the warm sensation in his chest once more return with a fiery passion as a genuine smile touched his lips.

Drawn from his reverie as Sanji chuckled and gestured vaguely towards several empty seats, “Go ahead; they won't bite more than they already have.”

Awkwardly edging through the group, Zoro took a seat on one of the chairs near the back so he had a good view of the lanes, the score on the television, and he was also just far enough out of the way to not interrupt any conversations. Sanji plopped down next to him after retrieving a half finished beer that he must have left to come get Zoro, taking a swig before leaning in to say over the music, “We put you in the system, but you missed the first round and Luffy went for you.”

Zoro's gaze tracked up to the screen on the wall and noted seven names up on the board with utter confusion; Pirate King, Sniper King, Mr. Prince, Rudolph, Cyborg, Soul King, and Superman. Blinking slowly as the nicknames that they had decided on did absolutely nothing to help him know whom each of the people in the group were; the only thing that he could possibly take away from it was that the crew had an undeniable obsession with being king of something.

Turning to Sanji, mouth open to ask what on earth the names meant, he found Sanji already gone and making his way up to the front as the man that had just finished made his way back. Passing by his original seat as he made his way towards Zoro, snatching up his own discarded beer.

“You're the hit and run guy from yesterday.” The man with curly hair noted, clearly trying to be polite and engage Zoro in conversation as he took a seat beside him. Foot coming up to rest on the opposite knee as he glanced over with a grin, “I was there; remember me?”

“Vaguely.”

“Usopp.” Introducing himself properly as he shifted his beer into his right hand so that he could offer Zoro his left.

Zoro snatched it up and gave a firm shake before returning the notion, “Zoro.”

“Nami was the other EMT on scene; redhead.” Usopp explained idly, “When we got the call we were certain there was gonna be a much bloodier scene when we arrived.”
“I'll say.” Usopp snorted, “You're kinda the talk of the department right now; we don't get many interesting calls like that. Was Luffy's idea to name you Superman.”

Zoro's gaze swiftly flicked back up to the screen, unsure of how he felt about the ridiculous nickname and immediately wishing he could argue against it. Turning his sights back to the other man he just offered a small huff and a short nod in understanding.

“So, how'd Sanji rope you into coming?” Usopp inquired with a snide grin, “Blackmail?”

“Offered.” Zoro shrugged simply, not entirely sure what the man was implying but assuming it was more of an inside joke among friends than an actual legitimate concern.

“He's a nice guy.” Usopp nodded solemnly, before chuckling softly to himself, “Bit of an ass, but a nice guy.”

They both turned as Sanji went up to take his turn, nabbing a blue ball from the rack as he made his way over to the lane. Hefting the ball up in front of himself, he readied himself before taking two long strides forward as his one foot tucked behind his front in a weird motion as he released the ball. It went fairly straight for most of it before veering a little and only taking out three pins from the corner.

Cupping his free hand around his mouth, Usopp shouted over the loud music, “Sanji, you suck!”

Sanji whipped around on his heel, finger already out and pointing at the curly haired man with a vengeance as he warned venomously, “Watch it, long nose!”

“Remember, Sanji.” The threat going unheeded as Sanji went to grab another ball and Usopp just continued to cackle loudly, barely getting the words out as he was already laughing far too hard. Another sort of inside joke that was clearly apparent to all those there as he shouted, “Be the ball!”

Sanji just kept his back to the man, holding up a simple rude gesture over his shoulder before getting into position and rolling the ball again. This time taking out the rest of the pins properly as a large dash lit up the screen above. Returning to the booth, he nabbed his beer and when he passed Usopp made a quick kicking motion that had the man jumping fearfully and spilling beer all over himself.
A pleased grin split Sanji's face as the other man jumped up with several muttered curse words to go clean up in the bathroom as Sanji retook his seat. Arm thrown over the back of an empty chair as he took a swig of his beer and watched the lanes as Chopper made his way up to go next. Taking note of the flashing name on the screen, it seemed to clarify that his nickname was Rudolph. From the order of the names it also made it easy to know Sanji's and Usopp's as well.

“So...” Zoro finally managed to mutter quietly in Sanji's direction, “what's with the names?”

“Ah,” Sanji glanced up at the screen before realizing Zoro's confusion and chuckling, “Well, Chopper's is cause he wore a pair of reindeer antlers to work once during Christmas; the name just stuck.”

“Cute.” Zoro commented with a scoff.

“Oh, adorable.” Sanji agreed vehemently with a nod, “But he hates it.”

“I'm a human.” Chopper groused quietly from his end of the table, nearly singsonging the words as though he had said them a million times and had grown weary of repeating them, “Not a reindeer.”

“Brook's is an old stage name from when he was in a band,” Sanji continued on – completely ignoring the boy whom stuck his tongue out at Sanji playfully – beginning to list off on his fingers casually, “Franky's broken so many bones that he's more plates and screws than human, and Luffy just likes pirates.”

“Ah.” Zoro made a grunt of understanding, when in reality the explanations didn't clarify nearly as much as he had hoped that they would. He felt like he needed a better explanation into Franky's injuries, and Brook's sounded like it required a whole story on its own.

“Usopp's--” Sanji began, jerking a thumb in the other man's direction as he returned from the bathroom before being cut off rudely.

“Fuck off.” Usopp grunted absently in the blond's direction as he passed, no venom to his words as it seemed to be more of reflex to say to the blond than anything else. A few paper towels in hand as it seemed he was still trying to dab his shirt dry from the beer.
Not even bothering to look over his shoulder at the other man that had just cursed him out, Sanji continued unperturbed, “Is cause he never misses.”

Zoro just raised an eyebrow.

Sanji idly waved a hand up to the scoreboard and sure enough next to Sniper King there was a row of perfect ‘X’s in every column. The blond noting petulantly, “Doesn't make him much fun to play against.”

“Yours?” Zoro prodded cordially.

“That's easy.” Sanji boasted, waving a dramatic hand towards himself and declaring haughtily, “It's because I'm every woman's Prince Charming.”

There was a loud derisive snort from the other end of the table that sounded like it hurt as Zoro muttered shrewdly, “You can't do that.”

“Huh?” Sanji cocked an eyebrow curiously, Zoro smothering a chortle at the way the man's face fell and was replaced with a perplexed expression, “What?”

“You can't just give yourself your nickname.” Zoro commented with a small chuckle, readjusting his casted arm as his gaze flicked up the man's eyebrows. Faintly hidden beneath his bangs as he levelled on Sanji and added snidely, “That's not how it works, Curly.”

“Hey!” Franky pipped up, “Curly. I like that.”

“Why haven't we been calling him that?” Usopp asked with genuine bewilderment, casting a glance around the group for confirmation. Sanji resting his face in his hand as the group began rising up with laughter and belligerent comments and Usopp and Luffy began fiddling with the controls in an attempt to change Sanji's name on the scoreboard.

“Alright...” Sanji chuckled softly under his breath, turning on Zoro with a stern brow belied by his smile. Pointing a finger directly at him as he warned, “I'm gonna let the first few go, but you keep this up and I'm gonna stop playing nice.”
Zoro just smirked innocently and gave an indifferent shrug, by all means daring the man to go ahead and make good on his threat. Sanji just rolled his eyes before nodding towards the lanes, turning his finger up at the screen where Zoro's odd, embarrassing nickname was flashing. “Your turn, mosshead.”

Eyebrows climbing high at the disparaging comment, Zoro pushed himself to his feet as Sanji just offered an innocuous shrug of his own in response. Shaking his head lightly in derision at Sanji’s behaviour, he turned and made his way over to the lane to choose a ball.

Picking a heavier one, he made his way over to the line and stared down the lane at the ten pins positioned at the end. It had been decades since he had gone bowling, but the premise seemed far simpler to him now than when he was younger. Taking into consideration the steps that the other men had done, he took a ready stance before following through and imitating them; sending the ball rolling straight with a lazy flick of his wrist. Compared to a head shot through heavy winds at several kilometres away, hitting a few pins a couple meters away with a large ball was child's play.

The ball continued straight until it hit the pins and knocked them all over with a loud crash, making his way back over to the group where he was strangely met with several high fives that seemed unnecessary. Taking his seat back next to the blond as Sanji turned an incredulous stare on him. “What was that?!”

“What?”

“You didn't say you were good at this!” Sanji accused childishly.

“You didn't ask.”

“That's not fair!” Sanji announced broadly, gesticulating wildly over at Usopp whom glanced over at Sanji’s outburst, already grinning smugly at Sanji’s whining, “We can't have two of you assholes be good at this game!”

“Step up, Curly.” Zoro muttered congenially.

Franky guffawed loudly at the comment, jerking a thumb towards Zoro as he leaned over to look at Sanji, “I like him; where'd you find him?”
“Under a truck.” Sanji groused petulantly, sending a glower Zoro's way, “Where he's gonna end up if he doesn't cut it out.”

This time Zoro couldn't stop the wide grin from splitting his face at the threat as the harsh banter was something he hadn't realized he had so sorely missed from his old life. Sanji rolling his eyes and wacking Zoro in his uninjured arm playfully, Zoro's smile only growing wider as Sanji shook his head and turned away to watch Chopper get up to go as he took a sip of his beer.

~X~

Offering to drop Brook off at his house a few blocks away, Zoro enjoyed a strangely hilarious conversation with the older gentleman before finally pulling into his own driveway and making his way inside. Heading into the kitchen to get a glass of water as the night had gone on much later than Zoro had expected but had been surprisingly enjoyable nonetheless.

It had been a while since he had hung out with a group of people and had felt that relaxed; the casual conversation and biting comments strangely comforting as they reminded him of a time long since past. Old army buddies and espionage partners; back when jokes were the only way to cope with the constant threat of death. But this had just been simple fun, and despite his earlier trepidation he did not regret it in the slightest.

Zoro hadn't expected them to offer him such an open invitation to join them next week, but he could easily admit to himself that it would not be the worst thing in the world if he got a chance to be accosted by those excitable people again. Fighting down a smile that had been permanently affixed to his lips since leaving, he finished off his water and set the glass in the sink before making to leave the kitchen.

Passing by the fridge, he paused as his eye caught the pad of sticky notes on the counter as he mulled over a thought for a few moments before conceding and snatching it up. Scrawling 'Hobbies?' across the top and underlining it before writing out 'Bowling' underneath it and pulling it free to stick on the fridge. Looking it over silently as it wasn't an entirely exciting idea, but it was a start.

Tossing the pen aside on the counter and making his way upstairs to bed, finding Kalifa already under the covers and sleeping soundly. Climbing in as gently as he could, he considered turning his back for a moment to keep his injured arm near the edge of the bed before deciding against it. Turning in to pull her warm body close to his front as he carefully lay his injured arm around her, cast coming to rest atop the blankets in front of her. Eyes falling shut as the last thing he saw were the comforting names scrawled across the top, and a particularly swirly signature that brought a small smile to his face.
TBC...
Standing in front of the large mirror, Zoro finished doing up the buttons on the cuffs of the stuffy tuxedo that was a little too tight across the shoulders. Hands coming up to readjust the collar and bow one final time before snatching up his shoulder holsters and slinging an arm through the straps to properly adjust it. Tugging on the left buckle until he was satisfied before carefully retrieving his guns from the beside table and sliding them comfortably into their holsters.

Pulling on his jacket, he did up the top two buttons to properly conceal the weapons as he gave himself a final once over. Nodding to himself in approval as he gave a tug on the lapels before he turned and made his way out of the room and down towards the lobby. Keeping his gait amiable as he attempted to blend into the high class crowd that were currently attending the gala in the ballroom downstairs.

A terse nod here, a formal bow there. Keeping his gaze shrewdly pinned on the floor as he took a proffered glass of champagne from a passing waiter. Sipping at the bubbling liquid absently as he tried to note anything off about any of the guests in attendance; not entirely sure whom he was looking for just yet.

There were more than a couple important political figures here, but the man he had been ordered to protect was a duke and an ambassador that had several death threats on his head. The CIA had granted his request for subtle protection and so they chose to send the best operative they had, and while the dossier on potential assassin threats was quite thin; Zoro had a particular knack for reading people and spotting potential threats amongst a crowd.

Approaching his client, Zoro dipped his head forward out of respect and intoned formally, “Sir.”

“Mr. Roronoa.” The gentleman replied haughtily, huffing around his moustache condescendingly, “From your reputation I was expecting someone a little less...”

Zoro straightened, champagne glass still held carefully in his grip as he raised a single eyebrow at the man which effectively cut his complaint short. There were a lot of things people assumed about him from his reputation – both good and bad – however Zoro had become quite adept at silencing lesser men with simply a look. Despite what anyone thought, he had no qualms about displaying just how easily he could kill a man.
Coughing nervously into his hand and glancing away the duke grunted, “Just do you your job.”

(Of course, sir.” Zoro muttered stiffly, keeping his face unreadable as he took a careful sip from his glass before turning away to begin once more carefully observing the room. Letting the duke wander and do as he please, but always staying a few convenient feet away while appearing aloof.

If he hovered too closely, anyone that would want to strike would catch on and either leave, or attempt to shoot Zoro first – something he would like to avoid. So as long as he kept a careful distance he would hopefully be able to notice anybody nearing the target long before they had a chance to do anything to him.

The night wore on late into the evening as politics and money were egregiously discussed over various wines and expensive platters of food from passing waiters. All the while Zoro staying on his guard despite the fact that it seemed that nothing seemed out of place amongst the crowd, and the threat was likely null on this evening. The night had nearly come to an end when a sudden movement had Zoro forcing himself over to his client just as a gun was pulled.

A gunshot rung out through the ball room, echoing high off the expansive ceiling and causing the chandeliers to quiver nervously as shocked gasps followed after in quick succession. The room twisting as Zoro found himself stumbling under the painful sensation of lead that had just entered his body. Lights dimming and faces melting while everything focused in solely on the pressure just above his heart where the bullet had penetrated.

Chest constricting sharply as each breath came in a short, sticking gasp that was barely enough to properly fill his lungs. Eyes widening in panic as he raised a hand to apply pressure to the wound as it wouldn’t be nearly enough to kill him, but if he didn’t get his shock under control he would likely pass out. Palming his chest as his other hand reached out blindly for anything to support his weight as the floor was beginning to shift under him and the ballroom was less and less recognizable by the second.

Hand tangling in some form of fabric, he found himself being rudely shaken as a distant screaming could just faintly be heard above the rushing of blood in his ears. A few more tortured gasps and a final furious shake had him snapping back into reality in the middle of the well lit ballroom, with pandemonium all around him. A man lying on the ground with blood pooling under him as people crowded around him in horror.

The surface that he was gripping pulled sharply once more and he turned disoriented to see the livid expression of the duke and the fistful of his shirt that he had grabbed. A final, exasperated jerk had him freeing himself from Zoro’s hold before gesturing wildly towards the doors, “What the hell are you waiting for?!”
Zoro glanced around in confusion, hands coming up to very quickly pat himself over as he realized in stunned confusion that he hadn't been shot. Utterly confounded over why he had believed he had been, and why his body had so certainly felt like it; the pain and sensations so real it was almost as though they had been pulled from a memory.

“He's getting away!” The duke shrieked hysterically as Zoro quickly put the concerning moment in the back of his mind as his professionalism took over and he was drawing his gun instantly. Several people screaming shrilly as they assumed he might shoot someone else, ignoring them as he darted across the room and made for the exit; military mindset taking over as he began hunting.

~X~

A loud, disconcerting blaring had Zoro's eyes snapping open to furiously glance at the location of the noise assaulting him. Hitting the top of the clock with a vengeance before snatching it up and noting with some credulity the lateness of the hour, a little flummoxed over how much he had overslept. Setting it back down in slight confusion, he pushed himself up until his legs hung over the side of the bed and the late morning sun shining through the window glanced across his naked back.

Bed empty, the smell of breakfast cooking downstairs was only a small distraction from the fact that he had somehow managed to sleep for nearly nine hours uninterrupted. Not by dreams, or memories, or even his own incessant need to wake before the sun that had been ingrained into his psyche after decades. Trying to figure out what on earth had changed to cause such a dramatic shift in his behaviour as he got dressed and slowly made his way downstairs.

Pulling on a rather baggy hoodie, he fiddled with trying to get the cast through the sleeve hole before eventually giving up and heading downstairs with only one sleeve rolled up. It could be that he had been fairly busy the other night, and possibly the fact that he had went to bed a little later than was usual for himself. But as he rounded into the kitchen, a hand running through his sleep tousled hair, he still couldn't quite shake the confusion over the sudden change.

His musings were quickly shaken as Kalifa handed him a cup of coffee which he took gratefully, sipping at it while he took a seat at the table. Noting the hearty breakfast she had taken the liberty to make since she had been the one to wake up before him for once.

“How's everything this morning?” She mused softly, finishing off making her own cup before making her way over to the table, taking a seat opposite him as she continued eating her half finished breakfast. Her movements as beautiful and graceful as ever, Zoro softly watching the way she took a petite sip of her coffee as her enchanting eyes stayed pinned to him.
“Better.” Zoro grunted warmly, biting into a piece of toast and groaning happily at the perfectly buttered slice. Humming happily as she nodded at the reassurance and turned back to her magazine as Zoro started on his breakfast. By the time he had shovelled his meal down, Kalifa was just finishing hers and he set about cleaning the kitchen.

Clearing the table and beginning the dishes before slowly edging over to wear she still sat in her black night gown, bringing his uninjured arm around her gently. Pressing a kiss to the top of her head in gratitude as he murmured, “Thanks for breakfast.”

Head falling back, he watched the mesmerizing trails of golden hair tip back to shimmer in the morning sunlight as his eyes met her enchantingly icy blue. Her gaze melting when it met his as she angled her head up to give him a chaste kiss on the lips before giving him a warm smile. A final squeeze and he removed himself from her, his emotions pure and their interactions genuine, but they had somehow become lie in the face of the deceit she kept.

Heading over to the sink, he began rinsing the dishes before loading them into the washer while asking absently, “What are you doing today?”

“Baby is redoing her living room.” Kalifa mused, and Zoro could tell from her tone that for once it wasn't a lie. They had been at this facade long enough that it was easy to tell when she was simply feeding him falsehoods in order to get out of the house, “She wants me to go along to help pick out a new chaise.”

It was hard to tell if her words were a subtle hint or not, but Zoro knew she was also the type that would demand something rather than timidly hint at it. Nevertheless, he closed the door on the washer and turned to her as he asked, “Do you want to get anything?”

“No.” She shook her head simply, gazing falling on Zoro once more as he found himself mesmerized by that loving stare that had somehow never wavered over the years. Knowing that what they had wasn't perfect, but also knowing that after the life he had previously led it was more than he could ever ask for, “I have everything I need.”

~X~

Zoro braced himself calmly beside Conis as he kept a firm, yet reassuring hand to the body of the large canine on the examination table, casted hand holding a bit more gently so as not to hurt the creature. His normally placating nature a useful tool for keeping the animals relaxed whenever the
veterinarian stopped by to inspect the animals. Final shot given, Zoro slowly released the dog as it carefully pushed itself up into a seated position.

Conis immediately giving a few reassuring strokes to his pelt to calm him after the unpleasantness of what had just happened. It only took a few minutes before it was just a second thought to the dog as she once more was yipping and hopping in an unruly manner as Conis attempted to get her back to her kennel.

“Next we need to check Felix.” Conis handed off her keys to Zoro, “I'll put Adelle away if you go get him.”

Zoro spent the next several minutes wandering through the secluded room they had set up for the mother and her new litter of kittens. Hopelessly picking up kitten after kitten and inspecting as he tried to remember the markers for Felix, mistakenly putting one down to pick up another and then forgetting which one he had already held. It just wound up with him getting scratched unnecessarily and Conis having to come in to save him, but not before getting an embarrassing photo of him on his knees juggling two kittens while third used his cast for a scratching post.

The rest of the afternoon went by fairly smoothly as they finished up with all the pets that needed walking, and then Zoro assisted with the final walk through to give all the dogs their meals for the end of the day. Stopping and giving each some attention – and staying with some of the ones that preferred company when eating – before finally making it to the last kennel of the day.

When he opened the door to place the dish down for Wado, she came trotting over and ignored it completely in favour of nuzzling up into his arms. Chuckling softly as he allowed her a bit of wily behaviour and ticklish licks to his neck before pulling her back enough to pet her neck a bit more calmly. Sitting back on her haunches, eyes closing and panting happily as he made sure to get all the spots that were no doubt itchy in the summer heat.

“You seem to really like her.” Conis noted fondly, sidestepping them to place the refilled water dish down in her kennel as well before turning to watch Zoro continue to fawn over Wado. Watching as she always did with her hands clasped in front of her politely and a sweet smile on her soft features.

“I do.” Zoro admitted softly, continuing to run his hands over her silky fur as she nuzzled into his palm. There was a bond between them that had begun the moment he had first met her and couldn’t quite explain. It was like she understood what he had gone through, that there was a silent mutual understanding of each other's pain that they managed to stifle in the other.

“You thinking of adopting her?” Conis needled eagerly.
“I hadn't... I hadn't thought about it.” Zoro admitted, but now that Conis had mentioned it he was beginning to wonder what reason there was to not to. Older dogs almost never got adopted, and half the time he spent here now was with her; what was stopping him from bringing her home. The answer of course rung out clearly in the back of his mind as he slowly pushed himself to his feet, “Can't though.”

“That's a shame.” Conis mused softly, never one to pry as she let the subject go as she continued wistfully, “I'd take them all home if I could.”

“Why not?” Zoro asked politely, watching as she locked the cage before following after her back to the main lobby of the shelter. Snatching up a bucket of towels that would need washing and bracing it on his hip to keep from having to put too much strain on his still injured shoulder.

“With a small apartment like mine?” She tittered sardonically, “I'd never be able to fit them all.”

“Ah.” Zoro noted softly in understanding, feeling guilty at the thought of the backyard of his house that was currently going to waste. Not a play house for a future child nor a kennel for a dog took up the large expanse of beautifully kept lawn; neither of those things that Kalifa wanted anywhere near her anyway.

“Besides I'd need like a farm to properly take care of all of them and give them all the space they'd need.” Conis continued to muse, taking the pail from Zoro as she shrugged with a smile, “Just a pipe dream though; plus the adoption rate is actually pretty steady so there's no real need to move.”

Zoro just nodded thoughtfully in agreement, as grateful as she was that most of the animals that came to the shelter eventually found good homes. However, there were always those few that ended up living the last few years of their life as a shelter animal before eventually having to be put down or simply dying of old age. Kitetsu was a prime example of a rough, old canine that would probably never have another home again besides this one.

Making his way over to the sink to properly washed his hands – while attempting to keep his cast as dry as possible – he wondered why it couldn't be possible to at least have a more open facility. The shelter was fairly big, and the back yard was adequate as long as the dogs were rotated, but having somewhere large enough for them all shouldn't be that impossible.

Drying off his hands, he helped finish off the last of the paper work with Conis before finally bidding her farewell for the day as she walked him to the door. Unlocking the customer entrance that had
been closed since shelter hours had ended as she held open the door for him.

“Thank you for all your help today.” Conis murmured sincerely, “I know I say it every time, but it really does mean a lot.”

“Only wish I could do more.” Zoro muttered softly while giving a modest shrug, as he made his way outside and beginning the short walk across town towards home. The words a resounding echo of everything he currently felt about his life.

~X~

Ducking into the local hobby shop a few blocks away from the shelter, Zoro slowly perused the isles as he mentally catalogued the stock of all his supplies at home and what he had been running low on. With his latest ship almost done, he was already trying to search for another spark of inspiration on what to make for the next; leaning towards something larger and more colourful this time.

Noting the array of woods and materials crammed onto each shelf, and the selection of bottles in the corner he began to get a relatively basic idea of the size he wanted to go for. Arriving at the paint selection and idly looking through it as there was a particular shade of chestnut that he always liked to use on the hull that he was running low on at the moment.

A child came bolting down the isle, and Zoro absently took a step forward so there would be more space behind for the delinquent to keep up his pace as he rounded the corner at a dangerous speed and yelled something as his footsteps faded. Another gleeful scream came from further in the shop as there were no doubt a bundle of children causing mayhem for the store owner. Replacing the bottle of paint he had been looking over, he snagged another as he wondered if he should go for something with an earthier tone.

“Ninjin, put that down or I swear to god I will tell your mother.” A familiar voice groaned out, and it had Zoro pausing as he glanced towards a nearby isle. There was a distinct sound a child sticking his tongue out and humming tauntingly, before scurried footsteps fled from an exasperated adult that rounded the corner, “I'm the adult here; where's the respect?”

Zoro recognized the man, just as Usopp looked up and seemed to take note of Zoro's presence as well. The look of exhaustion fleeing his face as he asked in surprise, “Zoro?”

“Hey.” Zoro nodded politely in greeting.
“What're you doing here?”

Zoro held up the paint in his hand in explanation, before glancing down one of the isles where two boys went bolting past at break neck speed. Barely catching a glimpse as one in a hat seemed to be chasing the other one that looked to be holding something fairly valuable, “You?”

“Supplies for a school project.” Usopp groaned, placing a hand on his cheek in exasperation and casting a glance at where Zoro had been looking hopelessly, “I see you've met my kids.”

“Energetic.” Zoro noted.

“Oh, you have no idea.” Usopp assured tiredly as a third boy slowly made his way up behind Usopp, far too absorbed in his phone to do anything more than stumble along at a slow pace. Usopp glanced back and seemed almost relieved to see the third behind him not causing trouble as Zoro was struggling to understand how the young man could already have three boys that had to be nearly ten years of age.

“This is Tamanegi.” Usopp introduced the boy, as the young child held out his hand politely for Zoro to take and give it a firm shake before going back to his phone. Usopp placed a hand on his shoulder and gave a light squeeze as he chuckled, “Tama here's the only one that keeps me sane.”

A soft smile touched Zoro's lips before both adults turned sharply at a clattering noise followed by high pitched yell, “Everything's okay!”

“Aaand you've met the other two hellions.” Usopp groaned, turning back to face Zoro with a slightly pained expression aging his usually youthful face. Though he didn't appear under slept, there was a frazzled nature to his movements that made him seem a little worn down, changing the topic as he nodded towards the item in Zoro's hand, “What's the paint for?”

“Models.” Zoro admitted shyly, the hobby not exactly something he shared with anyone outside of his therapists; the whole thing started as a way to focus his frustration into a time consuming, delicate task. There had been many failed attempts in the beginning, but it had definitely turned into one of the less tortuously mundane parts of his new life.

“Oh!” Usopp intoned in surprise, clearly not taking Zoro for the type as he glanced over the selection before picking out a new brand in a similar colour to the one Zoro was holding, “Then I’d suggest
trying this stuff; have you used it?"

Zoro took the bottle and simply shook his head minutely. While he had been doing it for a some time now, he still made most of it up as he went along; finding he had much better skill with a whittling tool than he did with paints and colours. Up until now he had just picked colours that he had found worked nicely to him.

“This one is oil based,” Usopp explained knowledgeably, pointing to the bottle eagerly as he continued, “It'll take longer to dry, but it won't crack and the colour will be way more vibrant.”

“Thanks.” Zoro murmured as he glanced down at the bottle in his hand, noting the brand for future reference before looking back up, “You seem like an expert.”

“Like I said; school projects.” Usopp chuckled with an exasperated shake of his head, “My house is gonna be a mess until they're moved out.”

“A lot of kids for your age.” Zoro noted politely, the other man could barely be older than Zoro was himself and he already had three adolescent boys. It was kind of hard to fathom how old the man must have been when he had decided to start having children.

“We adopted.” Usopp shrugged casually, “My wife – Kaya – works in prenatal; she wanted a hoard of kids but these three were put up for adoption shortly after birth. The rest is history.”

Zoro just nodded thoughtfully, gifting the man a grin at the touching nature of it as he was sure there was a bit more to the story that the other man didn't feel the need to elaborate on. Regardless, it was easy to notice the fondness in his voice when he talked about not only his wife but his kids as well; an effortless love for all of them in his words.

“What about you?” Usopp gestured vaguely towards the wedding ring on Zoro's hand, “You guys got any kids?”

“No.” Zoro shook his head, decidedly keeping quiet about the fact that they were likely to never have any. While the discussion had never come up, it was clear from both of their backgrounds that neither he nor Kalifa were in a rush to bring a child into the world; if at all.

“Probably for the best.” Usopp jested lightly, turning to Tamanegi – whom was still ignoring both of
the adults – and placing a hand on his head to affectionately ruffle his hair. The boy squawking indignantly and batting his father's hand away while never taking his eyes off the phone in his hand, “I'm gonna be grey by the time I'm forty with the way these guys run me.”

Another uproarious screech of laughter echoed down an isle as the other two came racing into view, panicking at the sight of their father. Making to turn and run away, one of the boys began pushing the other hectically to get him to move faster before Usopp seemed to finally have enough of their antics.

“Alright, ya filthy pirates.” Usopp called out in a horrible attempt at a pirate voice, “Get your butts to the bridge!”

Despite being rambunctious, the boys clearly had some form of respect for their father as they listened and almost immediately darted over to where they were. Zoro had to give Usopp credit, the boys may have seemed delinquent at first but they obviously knew the boundary between when Usopp was teasingly trying to control them and when play time was actually over.

“This is my little crew.” Usopp grinned proudly, gesturing to the boy with a toque and then to the other with eccentrically dyed dark green hair, “Ninjin and Piiman; say hello to Mr. Roronoa.”

“Hello.” Piiman belted out obnoxiously, Zoro finding himself a little caught off guard by the volume level that these particular kids seemed to operate at. Nodding with a small smile as the boy raised a dirty sleeve to swipe across his snotty nose in an attempt to wipe it away.

“Yo, Mr. R.” Ninjin offered next, head titled all the way back to look up at him as his vision was poorly obscured by the mop of messy hair on his head and the toque pulled far too low over his eyes. Usopp only rolled his eyes at the boy’s attempt to sound cool, obviously not going to even bother to tell the kid off for his lack of manners.

“Yo.” Zoro tried back flatly, a little overwhelmed with suddenly having three young children with their attention on him all at once. Something about their unwavering confident behaviour was minutely intimidating in a way Zoro wasn't entirely sure how.

“What happened to your arm?” Piiman asked loudly.

“Fought a bear.” Zoro stated flatly.
Enjoying the look of genuine horror that lit up Piiman's face as he glanced wearily to his father, clearly not entirely sure if Zoro was joking or not. Ninjin on the other hand just continued to keep his held titled back to he could see Zoro from under his hat as he stated nasally, “No way.”

Zoro just smirked down at the kid.

“Prove it.” Ninjin snapped back haughtily, Zoro a little surprised at the bold, stubborn nature of the child. It was beginning to remind him a little of himself when he had been younger; a long time ago before he had seen just how harsh the world could be.

“Oi!” Usopp finally snapped, sending the boy a lighthearted glare as he berated, “Manners.”

Ninjin just rolled his eyes.

“Hey, Mr. R.” Piiman requested once again using a voice a little too loud for being inside, pointing snot-sleeved arm towards the casted arm hanging at his side, “Can I sign your cast?”

“Guys, come on now, you--”

“Look Dad signed it!” Tama finally chirped up, pointing at the man's signature on the side that was accompanied by a drawing of an interestingly dressed superhero. The other two boys immediately growing insanely hectic at the notion of their father being allowed to do something they weren’t as Ninjin joined in, “No fair!”

“Do you mind?” Usopp finally chuckled nervously, clearly not sure how else to calm the rambunctious three as he gifted Zoro with a silently pleading look. Zoro still a little flummoxed over how many people seemed to enjoy such a weird, mundane ritual – even Conis insisting on signing her name to offer some healing vibes.

“By all means.” Zoro grunted with a shrug, offering his arm out as one of the boys snagged a marker off the shelf that would no doubt have to be paid for afterwards as all three set to work signing it. By the time they were finished a large pirate ship sporting a modest jolly roger now filled up another large portion of the cast, along with a few stick figure drawings of the three boys.

Once they were finally done, they very quickly lost interest in the conversation the two adults had been having in the interim and immediately began making to leave. Ninjin tugging forcefully on his
fathers hand while Piiman started complaining loudly that he was hungry.

“We should get going,” Usopp alluded casually, though it was clear that them leaving was not at all his decision and he was simply at the mercy of the three rambunctious boys, “They can't stand still for longer than a couple minutes at a time or else they'll turn into gremlins.”

Chuckling softly as the man still was attempting to talk to Zoro as his three kids were now all working together to shove him away and down the isle. Giving a short wave to the father as Zoro offered casually, “See ya.”

“See you again Saturday?” Usopp asked over his shoulder, the offer having been made yesterday, but a part of Zoro had just expected it to be out of politeness. A little taken aback that it seemed to be a genuine invitation and that they were honestly expecting him to be there.

“Yeah.” Zoro nodded, wondering idly to himself why they had so easily invited him into their group, “Sure.”

“Great.” Usopp grinned, managing to tear one of his hands away long enough to wave farewell before he allowed his boys to pull him the rest of the way down the isle. Pausing and turning back to Zoro as he cajoled, “Oh, by the way, wear your sling or you're gonna give Sanji an aneurysm.”

Zoro found himself a little taken aback by the random comment, glancing down at his casted arm for a moment in confusion before back up to see the man's retreating figure. Raising a confused brow at the notion of the other man and why he would possibly care that much as he muttered, “Uh... alright.”

Usopp already out of earshot as he rounded the corner, and there was a moment of scuffling followed by a gasp of horror, “Oh my god, Piiman get that out of your mouth!”

~X~

Turning the television off, Zoro pushed himself to his feet with a weary stretch as the credits had just begun to roll for the old samurai movie. Left hand coming up to adjust the strap of the sling that had been pressing into his neck since he had put it on after arriving home. Feeling a little foolish about allowing himself to be guilt tripped into wearing it, but also unable to stop the nagging sensation in his gut at the notion that the lack of the sling would bother the blond paramedic.
The injury to his shoulder definitely wasn't that bad, but he would begrudgingly admit that it eased the pressure off the joint quite noticeably. Plus, anything he could do to keep a crew of devoted medical professionals from criticizing him was something he would gladly do.

As he began making his way upstairs to the bedroom, he began idly undoing the strap and pulling the sling from his body. Oddly noting the parallels between the sling and the old holsters he used to wear; although they were for an entirely different reason and held something far more lethal than an injured arm. Tossing it aside on the dresser he made his way over to the bed where Kalifa sat reading quietly, glasses perched carefully on her slender nose.

Pulling off his shirt as he neared, Kalifa glanced up from her book and paused as her gaze fixed properly on his visible cast for the first time that day. Hand coming to hold the page of her book as her stare shifted curiously over his arm before coming up to meet Zoro's, “What's on your cast?”

Pausing with the corner of the covers held in his grasp, Zoro looked down at his right arm in confusion before realizing she meant the cast itself. Noting all the signatures and drawings from the past few days fondly before glancing back at her with a small shrug, “Signatures.”

Her eyes continued to critically scan it, noting the obnoxious drawing done by Luffy, and the drawing of the pirate ship done earlier that day by Usopp's boys before looking back up at him and stating carefully, “Isn't that... a little childish?”

A spark of rage lit itself in his chest at the mocking words as he instantly thought of the kind smile Sanji had offered when first signing the cast, and the pleasant happiness he had felt when everyone else had signed it as well. The memory suddenly becoming cold with her words as he bit his tongue to refrain from snapping back something harsh as he knew he needed to leave. Instead of facing the thoughts that were going to begin circulating he released the blanket in his grip as began making his way back out of the bedroom with stern determination.

“Where are you going?” Kalifa asked with quiet confusion, obviously oblivious to the fact that her comment had just set him off. Something that he couldn't begrudge her for as he knew that this sudden burst of anger inside of him was completely irrational.

“Basement.”

“Now?” She intoned incredulously.
Zoro simply grunted in confirmation as he made his way out of the bedroom and downstairs, not entirely sure why he was filled with a rising anger at her ridiculous comment but needing to control his baseless emotions. Thudding his way across the main floor as he rationalized he was probably just displacing his self directed frustration onto her when she simply didn't deserve it.

It had happened a lot at the beginning – when his trauma had been particularly bad – and it had taken him a long time to learn to redirect it away from others when they did not deserve it. Just like now, his current lividness at her cruel words clearly was just a manifestation of his own frustration over his injuries and his recent relapse; it had nothing to do with her.

Down in the basement he didn't even bother to bandage his left hand as his took a stance in front of the heavy bag, reeled back, and threw his whole weight into the punch. Continuing with vicious hit after merciless kick until his body ached, his breathing was erratic and all he could do was stumbled over to the wall and collapse against it. Legs splaying out under him as he stared at the dull concrete floor of the basement as he let the last vestiges of his anger seep away.

TBC...

Chapter End Notes

A/N: It feels wrong that someone else is making Zoro breakfast besides Sanji... Also yes, Zoro's relationship with Kalifa is very unhealthy; it's supposed to be. Everything will work out in the end though; I promise.
Panting echoed out though the cool night air, each breath coming in a heavy wheeze as a stumbling...
set of footsteps came to a halt. Knees buckling inward as Zoro used the last of his remaining energy to keep himself upright, right arm cradling a particularly bad injury on his left as he stared down his assailant. One eye completely swollen shut from the brutal fight that had just taken place.

The rocking of the waves on the small marina vessel had Zoro’s already unsteady body swaying dangerously while watching the other man near him. Gun sheathed and blade drawn as he really was just having fun with Zoro at this point, the whole evening having been just one large game.

“I’m surprised you’re still standing.” The operative noted with a lazy drawl, flipping the blade around in his grip to take a more natural hold as he continued stalking nearer, “What’s your name?”

“Roronoa.” Zoro gritted proudly, tasting copper on his tongue faintly as a rather nasty stab wound from their struggle below deck was beginning to get the better of him. Fighting back the faintness twinging his vision as he pushed himself a little more upright to face the other man.

“You’re just a kid...” He noted with almost an air of surprise, sounding a little saddened by the notion as he continued, “Still very new to this, aren’t you?”

Zoro didn’t say anything.

Continuing to cradle his injured body as he glared down the other man confidently, carefully watching for any movement if the man intended to strike again. Much older eyes watched for a lot longer than Zoro would have thought, before he seemed to decide on something. Hand and blade lowering as he murmured, “I’ll let you live.”

“No thanks.” Zoro grunted cheekily, lifting his jaw stubbornly as he finally released his injured arm to right himself properly. There was no way he would ever turn his back on somebody that could change their mind and so easily kill him; let alone make him look like a coward for running away. Chest jutting out as he managed, “Scars on the back are shameful.”

Eyes widening in surprise, the other man seemed completely caught off guard by Zoro’s reaction before a wide grin split his face as he jeered happily, “Well said.”

And without a second more of hesitation the man was darting forward and bringing his blade down in a swift arch, the steel ripping through his chest in one clean motion. Pain not initially felt as the sharp metal sliced through his skin mercilessly, divided his muscles apart, and even struck bone.
Blood immediately gushing from the wound that ran the length of his torso as the blow had him stumbling backwards against the low railing of the boat.

Zoro felt himself falling backwards towards the frothing water below, only the moment his back made contact it was replaced by the stiffness of a mattress. Eyes snapping open as his hands came up to grasp his shirt in large clumps and a tortured gasp was ripped from his throat in a raw, painful scream. Body spasming as he curled in on himself as the memory of the laceration lashed across his mind and body like a hot whip, each flash causing a seizure of pain to lance through him.

Flailing out of bed, Zoro landed hard on his hands and knees as he braced himself while still gasping desperately for any air that he could possibly get in his uninjured lung. The memory of his near evisceration so visceral in his mind as he couldn't calm himself long enough to rationalized that the pain wasn't real. It took several minutes of panicked heaving before he eventually managed to get control over his breathing.

Falling back on his rear, back resting against the edge of the mattress as his hand continued to rest against his body in shock as the painful memories still abated. Unable to properly fathom how the pain that had happened so many years ago could have possibly felt that real.

Pushing himself to his feet, he stumbled over to the bathroom of the small hotel and proceeded to splash handfuls of cold water onto his face until he began to feel a little more in control. Padding his face dry with a towel, and as he lowered it, he noted his reflection and the noticeable scar running the length of his body. An old scar that had long since healed since his stubborn, ignorant youth.

Tossing the towel aside with a vengeance, he ambled across the small suite and to the balcony, stepping out into the cool evening air and reaching out for the railing. Resting his hands heavily against it as he allowed his head to drop and his shoulders to rise tensely, finally beginning to realize the symptoms of what had been plaguing him the past couple months. Knuckles turning white in barely restrained anger as the reality of what was happening to him began to sink in.

~X~

Once again Zoro spent the next several weeks in the same early routine as he adapted to life in a cast, however found himself continually dragged into the misadventures of the charming blond and his group of renegade paramedics. Weekends were usually spent bowling and the occasional night had them over at someone's house watching a sport of some kind. One night in particular they spent at Usopp's watching a soccer game and it was the longest Zoro had seen his three boys sit still for.

Morning jogs had become a regular thing once more as his shoulder continued to heal, and it hadn't
been long until they were taken over by the blond. Insisting to tag along for a lap around the park which usually led to an unnecessary race that had them both collapsing on a patch of grass by the time they were done. On one occasion Sanji had the misfortune of getting pushed in the lake and getting attacked by a duck; a sight which had probably been one of the funniest things Zoro had seen in his life.

The days grew longer as the heat continued to rise, a laziness spreading across the rural community as afternoons were spent lounging in the park or down by the lake. As spring came to an end, the arrival of summer had him once more in his therapists office as the monthly interrogation took place. One of the few dreary days they had had that month as he sat in the luxurious leather chair that was designed to comfort him despite its ability to put him on edge.

“Seems you've had quite the month.” Robin noted sincerely, eyes on Zoro's cast as he sat opposite her in the office as a summer rain pattered on the window outside. While his shoulder had healed spectacularly, his arm was still in need of a few more weeks; a cast change needing to take place soon. “Do you want to tell me about it?”

Zoro was quiet for long moment, though instead of being out of reluctance to speak, it was because he honestly couldn't figure out what to say first. So much had happened in such a short period of time, and for the first time in all of his sessions with his therapist he actually couldn't decided on what to tell her about first. Eventually deciding on the beginning, as the injury was no doubt what interested her the most.

“I got hit by a car.” Zoro finally stated bluntly.

“Sounds traumatic.” Robin noted simply, though not at all surprised. Either the woman had just come to expect that sort of behaviour from him, or she had heard it in passing due to how small the town was and how much people loved to talk. Zoro was sincerely hoping it was the latter.

“It wasn't.”

“Anything happen?” Robin inquired with an air of concern, “Recollections?”

“There was a moment – flashes – but I got it under control.” Zoro explained tersely, remembering the painful memories that had begun to assault him and immediately cast them aside. Not needing them to resurface and bother him now of all times; especially not when the rest of the month had went by without any other incident.
“Considering the situation that is very commendable.” Robin complimented him lightly.

“There were more important things happening.” Zoro argued. As shocking as the situation had been, his concern over the child had managed to ground him enough to keep everything in perspective. It had taken some effort, but his sessions with Robin at least seemed to be paying off in some aspects; one of which was the times they had taken to practice redirecting his memories.

“Anything else?” Robin eventually prodded delicately, “It seems as though you have more you want to say...”

Zoro had to refrain himself from grinning wryly at her; always impressed with how perceptive she was, but had long since learned to not be surprised by it. She was correct, of course, there was still so much more he wanted to tell her about but knowing where to begin felt impossible. A smile finally working its way onto his face for an entirely different reason as he knew the exact catalyst that had started it all.

“Remember the man I mentioned?” Zoro began slowly, awaitng her nod of recognition before continuing, “He was the paramedic on scene.”

“Interesting coincidence.” She noted idly, “Is that important?”

“Well...” Zoro trailed off, feeling thrown by the noticeable underlying tone of her question, but unable to deny how accurate it was. Finally nodding, and admitting to her, “Yes.”

“Why don't you tell me about it?” Robin urged softly, leaving the option out there for Zoro to refuse. However, Zoro didn't feel the need to shut down about this like he usually did, instead he wanted to tell her about everything. About all the mundane, normal interactions he had had that month and the simple – yet amazing – well adjusted people he had come to know.

And so he did.

Zoro began pouring out everything that had happened the past month from the accident, to the evening he spent with Sanji and his co-workers, and every event since. Reminiscing about the weekends that he spent at the alley with them, and the few nights Sanji had had him over to watch a game or two despite Zoro not caring for the sport in the slightest. And how he had come to know each one of them more than he had thought would be possible.
He told her about the excitable man named Luffy that spent almost all of his spare time at one of the downtown boxing gyms. How asking about his moniker lead to a lengthy discussion on pirates and the man's obsession with them; which ended up with Zoro being shown several of Luffy's quite detailed tattoos of various pirate lore. Even admitting to immediately finding himself taking a liking to a particularly vibrant ship tattooed on the boy's shoulder with an impressive lion figurehead.

He mentioned Usopp – the other EMT that had arrived on scene with Sanji – whom hated driving with either Luffy or Franky because they drove at neck braking speeds. And how the man was a whiz at bowling and darts, and when they had been over to watch the game he had painted his entire torso in vibrant colours in support of his team. Then he went on to talk about the man's family and his three sons, happily pointing out the drawing they had added to his decorated cast.

And then there was Chopper, who was the emergency physician that was generally on call whenever the rest had shifts. Zoro had been surprised to find out that the young man was actually a certified doctor, but a short discussion with him made Zoro realize just how intelligent the kid was. It also took no time at all to realize that the boy was worse at taking a compliment than Zoro was.

Then he discussed Franky, who worked for the NHS and was in charge of the maintenance of all of the ambulances at the hospital, as well as being a certified driver so he could go on frequent calls. He talked about how during one of the games Zoro had found out that his family actually owned the main auto shop in town and when he wasn't at work he was usually restoring some old relic at one of the empty bays for his brother. It didn't take long for him to bully Zoro into agreeing to bring his truck by at some point to get looked at.

There was Brook who had been working at the hospital for the past fifty years and had been shuffled through each department over the course of his employment. Just recently he had decided to work as an assistant in E.R. and now spent a large portion of his day helping Chopper and dealing with walk-in patients. It turned out that he was actually the same Mr. Brook that lived a few blocks away that taught violin lessons to a lot of the kids in the area.

And then there was Sanji; the vibrant, cheeky paramedic with a fiery personality and passionate soul. The foul mouth on him overshadowed by the genuine kindness he showed everyone he met, and the way he doted on his friends while complaining loudly to try and conceal how much he actually cared. The man spent all of his spare time cooking for his friends, and fishing out on the lake in the summer.

By the time Zoro had finished talking, Robin was leaning back in her chair comfortably and her clipboard discarded on the table beside herself. Hands clasped loosely in her lap as she simply smiled at him softly. A short silence stretched between them as Zoro was finally at a loss for words, and she broke the silence, “I'm proud of you.”
Zoro just scowled incredulously, raising an eyebrow and scoffing in confusion, “Hm?”

“This was the first time you came in and willingly talked to me for our entire session.” She noted, Zoro's eyes flicking to the clock in minute surprise as he realized that the hour was up. It had been probably the least torturous session with her to date, and it had flown by without him noticing, “I haven't ever seen you open up like this before.”

A response died on his tongue as Zoro simply nodded in embarrassment, always a little annoyed whenever she commended him as it always sounded like she was praising a child.

“You're less withdrawn, there's positivity to your words...” Robin mused, “These people are clearly good for you.”

Zoro managed a shrug, before forcing out, “I was coerced; not my choice.”

Robin just laughed softly at Zoro's petulant words before noting, “I would like to meet and thank this Sanji for being able to put up with you and pushing past your stubborn walls.”

“He's persistent.” Zoro remarked.

“He must be.” Robin countered with a smirk, “Anything else planned this week?”

“Yes.” Zoro responded, almost sounding surprised by his own admission as he was still a little shocked at what he had agreed to, “Actually.”

“Do tell.”

“Well,” Zoro paused shortly, head tilting to the side as he admitted casually, “I'm having everyone over for the game tonight.”

“Really?!” Robin intoned seriously, eyebrows raising in interest as for the first time Zoro could discern actually surprise in her voice.
“Not my choice.” Zoro echoed in explanation. It had originally be Sanji whom had offhandedly bemoaned not having a big enough apartment to really invite over everybody, let alone serve them a proper barbecued meal. Without even really thinking Zoro had offered up his house and his barbecue for the blond's use, and now he was on the rope for at least a dozen people taking over his house that evening.

“You don't sound too put out by it.” Robin commented slyly, glancing down at her watch before politely excusing him, “I suppose you'll need to be heading home then.”

“Yeah.” Zoro nodded, already pushing himself out of the chair and relieved to be leaving without feeling like he was fleeing from her. Heading towards the door as he found his shoulders feeling lighter than they had in weeks, and an odd surge of pride at finally being able to express to somebody how excited he had been over everything that had happened to him recently. Pausing on his way to the door, he looked back down at Robin and admitted a bit shamefully, “I... I haven't really been working on that list.”

“There is no deadline for that, Zoro.” She admonished lightly, “It's just something for you to think about until you find something constructive you want to pursue. For now though it seems you have a much more important things to be concerned with.”

Reaching for the door, Zoro cast another glance back to give a nod of farewell to his therapist, finding Robin still watching him with a sharp gaze as she simpered, “I look forward to our talk next month.”

“Me too.” Zoro murmured as he closed the door politely behind himself, surprised at his own words as for the first time ever he genuinely meant them.

~X~

At almost exactly six in the afternoon, the doorbell rang and had Zoro glancing up from where he had been lounging in the living room. Making his way to the door and not at all surprised to find the blond haired man standing on the other side wearing a neat, pink button up and vest with a large container tucked under his arm.

“Hey Zoro!” Sanji greeted amiably, wavy hair falling into his eyes as kept it down for once. It was probably the most formal he had ever seen the blond; though most times they hung out it was either just after work, or when he was wearing his workout gear for their run.
“Punctual.” Zoro noted.

“Well, if I don't get started on these steaks before Luffy gets here then I'm gonna have to beat him off with a stick to keep him from eating them raw.” Sanji explained with a hint of exasperation in his tone, “The fact that the man hasn't given himself food poisoning shocks me.”

“Who is it, Zoro?” Kalifa simpered as she came around the corner to glance at their guest. Sanji stepping inside and toeing off his shoes while Zoro closed the door behind him, Sanji hardly getting his second shoe off before he was sliding up to Kalifa excitedly.

“This is Sanji.” Zoro introduced with a small wave towards the already swooning man as he made his way over to the two blonds. Placing his hands into his pockets before glancing over and telling Sanji, “Sanji; Kalifa.

“Well I'll be happier than a June bug in July.” Sanji crooned with his rich baritone, offering out his hand towards her with a charmingly lopsided grin, “To get the chance to meet a gorgeous woman such as yourself.”

Zoro's eyes flicked over to his wife wearily, knowing full well that unless she specifically wanted attention she was not so keen when it was unwarranted. However, it seemed she was in a more congenial mood as she reached out and took his hand in a welcomed shake as she requested with a sweet smile, “Please keep the unnecessary flattery to a minimum.”

“Ah, but ’tis not flattery; simply honesty.” Sanji swooned with an over dramatic flourish as he lowered his head. Kalifa retracting her hand swiftly before he had the chance to place a kiss on the back or do anything else that might invade her personal space.

Kalifa turned slowly to eye Zoro up with a humorous glint to her gaze as she murmured, “Where did you find this strange creature?”

“He's the paramedic that was on scene.” Zoro explained calmly as Sanji was once again not at all perturbed by Kalifa's stiffness towards him, and simply straightened as he grinned cheerfully at the both of them. How the blond could get rejected so often by women but remain completely unfazed was a trait that confounded Zoro more and more every day.

“Well then I guess thanks are in order.” Kalifa mused, as she waved them both off, “Let me grab some drinks; you boys go out back and start up the grill.”
They both watched her saunter way, Zoro idly noting the other man watching her retreating figure with a tad too much enthusiasm than was necessary. It wasn't something Zoro was unfamiliar with when it came to his wife, however he hadn't expected the blond to be so blatant about it. Once she was out of ear shot Sanji was turning back to Zoro with raised brows and a jeering grin. “Dude.”

Zoro just watched the other man with a deadpanned expression, hands remained buried deep in his pockets as he grunted in warning, “That's my wife.”

Sanji didn't seem at all threatened by Zoro as he just gushed firmly, “She is so hot.”

“Noted.” Zoro grunted flatly.

“Seriously though,” Sanji pressed, following after Zoro as he turned to make his way through the house and out to the backyard. The barbecue out on the back porch had been set up since they had moved in two years ago and still had yet to be properly used, “How did you land her; it must be a fantastic story.”

“Long story.”

“I have time.”

“You really don't.” Zoro shook his head firmly, not entirely in the mood to relive that part of his life; not to mention the entire explanation of his past career that would have to take place first. Despite how much he had come to know Sanji the past few weeks it was still something that he would prefer to only discuss with his therapist; and even then barely with her.

Pulling back the patio door, he showed Sanji to the grill as the blond seemed to tell that Zoro wanted the subject dropped and instead began cooing over the barbecue. Complaining about how he wasn't allowed one on his apartment balcony and even if he was he wasn't sure he could afford one so expensive. Leaving Sanji to his devices as he began setting everything up, Zoro made his way back inside to find Kalifa in the kitchen just finishing up topping a second glass with a cold beer for Sanji.

“Sure you don't want to stay?” Zoro asked gently, already able to read from her body language that she was remaining polite to Sanji simply as a favour to Zoro. In all honestly Sanji was lucky the woman hadn't put him through the wall for continuing to coo over her after she requested him to stop.
“No.” She mused with a cheery smile, turning and handing the two glasses to Zoro, “I think having some you time with your new friends is important; besides I already have plans.”

“Okay.” Zoro gave in simply, not at all willing to fight her on it as he knew it would be pointless. Hands preoccupied, he leaned down to receive a loving kiss before bidding her farewell and heading back to the backyard. Leaving her to finish getting ready as she would no doubt be gone before anyone else had the chance to arrive.

Handing Sanji his beer, Zoro kept a hold on his own near-beer as it had been a year since he had been sober at the request of his therapist and wife; something that still had him on edge every once in a while. While he still occasionally missed the numbing affects of alcohol, it was crutch he couldn't allow himself to fall back on; no matter how in control of his addiction he had thought he had been.

“Kalifa not staying?” Sanji pried with a hint of dismay.

“She has plans.”

“What a shame.” Sanji sighed with a disappointed shake of his head, setting his beer aside as he turned his attention back to the grill and beginning to lay the steaks out methodically. Doubling back to adjust the spacing as he mused petulantly, “Even when the girls come to hang; our friend group is still such a sausage fest.”

“You scared her.” Zoro muttered scathingly, taking a sip of his drink before adding with a jeer, “Probably why the girls aren’t around too often.”

“Oi,” Sanji rounded on Zoro, brandishing the barbecue sauce stained tongs at him with a scowl, “you’re just saying that to hurt my feelings.”

“No.” Zoro intoned with a false inflection of surprise, feigning innocence.

“Well, they’re coming by tonight.” Sanji countered haughtily, “And you can ask them; I’m a delight.”

“Uhuh.” Zoro grunted, completely unconvinced as the doorbell rang distantly and cut the conversation short. Zoro setting down his near-beer and giving a short nod to excuse himself to go
answer it. Still more than a little unnerved at the fact that he had somehow been manipulated into having so many people over at his house at once; not to mention the fact that he wasn't as nearly as bother by it as he should be.

Pulling open the door, he greeted the three people on the other side with a polite nod and a grin. Franky and two women whom he hadn't met yet making their way inside and kicking off their shoes as Zoro closed the door behind them. Rounding on them, he offered to take the case of beer Franky had in his grasp but was quickly cut off.

“It's alright, my man!” Franky boasted loudly, “Just point me in the direction of the fridge and I can deal with it myself.”

Zoro made a gesture towards the kitchen and Franky was quickly sauntering away to make himself at home as Zoro was forced to turn and be left alone with the two strangers. Turning on them as he was very suddenly faced with short, fiery red head whom was watching him sharply, and a much sweeter woman that was already approaching him.

“I don't know if you remember me.” The girl with much kinder features simpered with an embarrassed chuckle, hand coming up to tuck a stray strand of vibrant blue hair behind her ear as she murmured, “But I was the E.R. attendant that helped you when you were brought in.”

“Of course.” Zoro nodded warmly, extending his left hand with gratitude as he vaguely began to recall her name from Sanji's introduction of her. The pain and adrenaline had made some of his memories from that afternoon hazy, but he could remember her quite clearly, “Vivi?”

“Y-yes.” She conceded with a tone of surprise, reaching out with her right before recovering and taking up his left in hers to give a firm shake, “Glad to see you're doing well.”

“I'm sure that thick forehead kept him safe from any brain damage.” The other woman crooned with a scathing bite, watching Zoro playfully as she was clearly daring Zoro to say something. "Nami!” Vivi scolded in a hushed tone.

“What?” Nami chuckled innocently at Vivi, before looking back up at Zoro with a shrewd glance, “Just saying.”

Zoro wasn't at all sure what to make of the woman's instantly hostile nature, but as he met her shrewd look he could immediately see something playful hiding beneath. Still not entirely sure what
her game was, it was clear she was testing him for some unknown reason.

“Bit of a bitch, aren't you?” Zoro commented flatly, keeping his eyes locked on her and playing whatever weird psychological mind games she wanted. A choked noise came somewhere from their left as Zoro refused to break eye contact with the other woman, waiting as she seemed to considering him before eventually breaking.

A smile split her face as she closed her eyes and she let out a genuine guffaw before levelling Zoro with a sharp look, “Alright, I like you; you can stay.”

“It's my house.” Zoro deadpanned.

“Not as long as I'm here.” Nami boasted haughtily, snatching up Vivi's hand and dragging her along as she crowed loudly, “Sanji, baby! Where are you?!”

Zoro just watched her go with an incredulous look on his face as he could hardly believe someone could be so confidently cold hearted, and yet enjoyably likeable at the same time. It was probably only because her attitude reminded him a lot of many of the spunky women he had worked with back in the army. A cocky arrogance to that was a strangely attractive quality, yet infuriating at the same time.

It didn't take long for everyone else to turn up, Luffy arriving with Usopp and Kaya; as their three boys immediately ran out into the back yard to make good use of the tree that certainly never got climbed in. Brook and Chopper coming a short while later, and the both of them stepping out onto the porch just in time to see Usopp waltzing over to his kids waving a dramatic hand as he boasted.

“I'll have you know I won many a tree climbing competition back in my day!” He gloated proudly, “Why, I was known as the World's Best back in my prime!”

A lot of quietly smothered chuckling came from most of the adults as a rather painful snort was heard from over near the barbecue. The kids however bought into the lie easily, and Usopp began pulling himself up into the tree to attempt to get up to where the kids had gotten.

“Boys!” Kaya admonished softly, “Please don't go wrecking Mr. Zoro's nice backyard!”

A chorus of disappointed groans coming from the tree, as well as one that sounded distinctly relieved
while Zoro waved her off politely. Talking loud enough for the boys to hear, “It's fine; it needs some use anyway.”

Several cheers of excitement – and one of clear reluctance – were shouted back in response as the boys returned to their attempts at getting as high as possible. Usopp only a couple branches off the ground but from the way his knees were shaking he was already clearly regretting his decision to climb so high.

“You sure?” Kaya insisted in concern, “If you'd seen what they have done to my house you would not be so calm.”

“If they managed to break the tree; then I'll just be impressed.” Zoro assured her.

“Shh.” She hushed playfully, shifting her drink into her other hand to reach out an gently smack his arm, “Do not let them hear you; they'll take it as a challenge.”

Zoro just gave a small chuckle in response.

~X~

It wasn't long until Sanji finished cooking the first round of steaks that were handed out before starting on a smaller batch that was no doubt for Luffy's benefit. Everyone milling about while sipping on their beers as they talked about work and daily events, Zoro caught in the middle of all of it as the initial awkwardness faded and he found himself enjoying it far more than he thought possible.

Everything from the relaxed atmosphere, to the easy way dinner was enjoyed out on the back porch, to the kids screaming excitedly while running around the backyard. All of it was something Zoro had never thought would be something he'd be part of – let alone enjoy – yet here we was. Currently having a conversation with Brook as the man casually told him about some of his new violin students that he had just recently taken on.

Eventually the sun began lowering and everyone crowded into the living room to watched the opening ceremony of the game, and for the first time Zoro was grateful for the ridiculous size of the house. With only two people living in it, most of the rooms had always felt too large and ridiculous for how often they were left unused, but now it seemed rather useful. However, despite the seating options, Luffy still found himself enjoying a spot on the floor.
Zoro remained seated in his chair watching as the first period began while Chopper leaned over him and gently poked and prodded along his arm while Zoro was just required to answer a few yes or no questions every few seconds. At first it had been strange having the near stranger all over him, but the past few weeks had made him realize that the young man just simply couldn't turn his work brain off.

“When are you scheduled to get your cast changed?” Chopper prodded seriously, finally satisfied with Zoro's shoulder even though he had been the doctor that had inspected it the week before when Zoro had went in for x-rays. The crack to his humerus was almost completely healed at this point, and the fracture to his forearm was coming along perfectly.

“Next week.”

“Okay, good.” Chopper nodded with a relieved smile, pulling himself away enough to take a seat on the couch as he continued to lean in towards Zoro, “Make sure to hold onto the old one though!”

“Sure?” Zoro inquired with a skeptical brow, glancing down at the collage of signatures and drawings that had faded over the last few weeks. A lot of the ink just dark smudges, though the 's' of Sanji's name still had a boldness to it, “It's starting to smell.”

“It's good luck!” Chopper chirped happily.

“Aren't you a doctor?” Zoro asked carefully. “Are you supposed to believe in luck?”

“Irrelevant.” Chopper waved a hand exaggeratedly in front of himself and raised his nose haughtily, “Saving your cast is a good omen; every good doctor knows this.”

Zoro just chuckled fondly at the young man before conceding, “Alright, I'll keep it.”

Chopper grinned ecstatically before finally turning back to the game, neither team having scored yet, but apparently they were collectively cheering for the one's in blue. Zoro tracking the ball lazily as it was kicked around on screen, still a little perplexed at why this was so exciting, but trying his best to enjoy it.
“Zoro~” Luffy singsonged from his seat on the floor, “Is Sanji done yet?”

Zoro wondered at what point he had been put in charge of cook watch, but he assumed since it was his house it was now partially his responsibility. It also seemed likely that Sanji might have imposed a ‘No Bothering Sanji While He's Cooking’ rule on the hungry menace. Pushing himself up from his chair with a grunt, he muttered, “I'll go check.”

Leaving the rabble to continue watching the game and chatting loudly, he made his way out towards the backyard where everything was already infinitely quieter. Zoro stepped outside, finding the blond leaning against the deck railing several feet away from where the barbecue was smoking pleasantly. A smell of rich meat cooking underneath as Sanji puffed on a cigarette patiently waiting for the food to cook to his specifications.

“Game's started.” Zoro explained tersely.

Sanji shrugged, pulling the cigarette way from his lips and resting his hand on his thigh as he responded with smoke swirling off his breath, “It's okay; nothing interesting happens in the first quarter anyway.”

“Luffy's hungry.” Zoro added.

“What's new?” Sanji scoffed through a chuckle, shaking his head fondly to belie his harsh words as his gaze grew soft at the mere thought of the ridiculous man. Taking another puff before drawing himself from his musings to glance over at Zoro, flicking his hair out of his sharp eyes as he noted, “Not much of a soccer fan, are you?”

“It's interesting.” Zoro allowed simply, not really having much time to enjoy or partake in sports since he had back in high school, and even then it had been rare. There had been far more fascinating things that had consumed him from a much younger age; things that now were hard to enjoy lest he cause a relapse.

“Bullshit.” Sanji laughed loudly, a large billow of smoke gushing from his mouth as he stated quite frankly, “I can see you falling asleep every game you've watched.”

Zoro didn't reply; he couldn't. Nothing he could say would properly justify why he found most thing so mundane in the wake of what he used to endure. Though it seemed almost unnecessary to try and excuse himself around the blond since it had become apparently obvious that the man at least had an
inkling of what Zoro had been through. How could he not?

After seeing the wounds that decorated his whole body in the ambulance ride Sanji no doubt had put the pieces together that Zoro was ex-military. Which was almost a relief since he didn't have to try and explain himself to the other man. However, that still didn't stop the blond from being curious despite his best efforts to appear aloof.

“Man...” Sanji reminisced softly, allowing the subject to be dropped as he usually did, “Really jealous of how nice it is having a backyard.”

“Then get one.”

“Pft.” Sanji scoffed sardonically, “Like I could afford it; not all of us can have a job that pays so well.”

Sanji never prodded, however he had a habit of leaving very open ended statements hanging in the air in case Zoro ever felt the need to respond. It was a little cheeky on the blond's part, but Zoro had just come to find it endearing in a very immature way. Obviously with his injuries, there was no way Sanji wasn't curious, and Zoro had to appreciate how much effort Sanji put in to not outright prying into his past.

“CIA.”

“Hm?” Sanji glanced over in shock, cigarette hanging loosely between his lips as his wide eyes turned on Zoro as he still clearly wasn't sure what he had just heard Zoro say. Body tensing and turning ever-so-slightly in Zoro's direction as the blond's curiosity was obviously horribly peaked.

Sighing heavily, Zoro pushed himself up off the railing but kept his hands gripping it tensely as he was already wondering what had come over him to admit something that private to him. Trying to shake his annoyance as he grumbled once more, “I was CIA.”

“Huh.” Sanji hummed deep in his throat, enigmatic eyes watching Zoro intently before finally turning away to stare off distantly. Hand raising to take another long drag, before releasing it and then just continuing to lean on the railing beside Zoro quietly. Thoughts clearly racing, but his demeanour calm and no sign of any more inquiries wanting to be made; it ticked Zoro off.
“That’s it?” Zoro asked somewhat indignantly, keeping his gaze pinned on Sanji as the man turned his head to watch Zoro just as calmly as he had before. If not a little surprised at Zoro's sudden outburst as his eyebrows raised slightly at Zoro's behaviour.

After careful consideration, Sanji finally spoke, “If I did ask you anything; what would you tell me?”

“That's classified.”

A wry grin split Sanji's face, “Exactly.”

Pushing himself off the railing, he ground out the butt of his smoke on the bottom of his shoe before pocketing it and making his way over to the grill. Opening the lid as a wave of delicious smoke came wafting up to billow around the blond, before he set to work inspecting each of the steaks. Beginning to flip a few of them as Zoro made his way over to watch, a tinge of annoyance beginning to set in.

“If you didn't want to know,” Zoro began stubbornly, “Why’d you keep bringing it up?”

Sanji shrugged, turning over one of the steaks before glancing shrewdly at Zoro with a smirk, “You seem like the type that needs to talk, but doesn't like being asked.”

Zoro was nearly indignant with how confidently the blond assumed he knew him, but was even more annoyed by the fact that the blond was absolutely right. He stood so long standing and fuming with self directed confusion that Sanji had already finished the plating the steaks.

“Here.” Sanji ordered, pulling Zoro from his musings as he offered Zoro the large dish stacked high with several steaks. Sanji already shooing him towards the patio door before Zoro even had chance to respond to Sanji’s earlier accusations, “Make sure to hold your hand flat when you feed the Luffy or he'll likely bite your fingers off.”

~X~

The game had ended with raucous cheers, toasted drinks, and excited screaming from some of the more invested fans as they narrowly won. Second half a bit more exciting as the score had been tied, however Zoro admittedly had drifted off for a few minutes early on before Sanji had very subtly woken him up by shoving an unlit cigarette up his nose. Crumpled remains of it were now in the trash after Zoro had managed to return the favour by cramming it in the blond's ear.
Everyone began heading out – Kaya rushing the boys out first as it had gotten well past their bedtime – most people giving each other a short farewell and discussing their next shifts. Zoro standing by the door as he bid Brook goodbye as the elderly gentleman began walking off down the block towards his own house. Barely getting the door closed before he was accosted by a far more amiable redhead – after having a few beers – as she gave him a cheeky pat on the shoulder, “You’re a good guy; I like you.”

“You seem alright.” Zoro commented back, his deadpanned expression seeming to only delight her more as she cackled happily. Slinging an arm around his shoulders and pulling him down so he was more on her level, not nearly as much alcohol on her breath as he had suspected and he began to wonder how much of this behaviour was an act.

“How do you feel about stock investments?” She inquired quite seriously.

“Aaalrighty.” Vivi chirped hurriedly, scooping the other woman away from Zoro and physically pushing her towards the door. Her attempt at a reprimanding tone failing as she whispered into the other woman's ear, “Time for you to leave.”

“Aw, c'mon Vivi.” Nami pouted, allowing the other girl to guide her out the door as she cast smirk back at Zoro. The predatory look on her gorgeous features sending a chill down his spine, “He seems like a wise investor.”

“Ignore her.” Vivi pleaded with a sincere smile over her shoulder, a timid wave followed as she managed, “It was wonderful to see you again, Mr. Roronoa. I look forward to next time.”

“Same.” Zoro nodded congenially, waving them out the door before turning around and immediately being face with a chipper Chopper whom insisted on a hug goodbye. By the time he had gotten the rest of the visitors out the door, he was feeling particularly exhausted, but not at all stressed over their extended company.

Gathering up the last of the dishes from the living room, he made his way into the kitchen where Sanji already had the sink full of hot, soapy water and was in the midst of washing up. Sleeves roll up past his elbows to expose his hairy forearms, and his hair tied above his head in messy bun as he worked to scrub a particularly large amount of barbecue sauce from a plate.

“You don't have to do that...” Zoro urged as he made his way over to the counter, beginning to set down the last of the dishes on the counter.
“I insist.” Sanji argued stubbornly, snatching a plate right out of Zoro’s hands before turning back to the sink to begin washing it as well. Despite the fact the Zoro very obviously had a dishwasher, he instantly knew that there would be no arguing with the blond on this and resigned himself to the man’s help.

Snatching up a dish clothe, he stepped around the stubborn blond and began snagging dishes from the rack to begin drying them. Sanji noticeably a little surprised at first, but refraining from saying anything as they continued to work in silence until the sink was empty and a large pile of dry dishes sat off to the side waiting to be put away. Sanji just finishing off drying his hands as he asked politely, “Where's the bathroom?”

“Upstairs.” Zoro replied absently, vaguely waving his hand in the direction of the stairs while beginning to stack several plates to be put away in the cupboard, “Third – no... second door on your right.”

“Do you not know your own house?” Sanji snorted snidely, already heading for the stairs but not before raising an incredulous brow in Zoro's direction.

A wave of heated embarrassment washed over Zoro's face as his shoulders tensed incredibly, pausing with a glass in hand and he rounded on the blond with a snarl, “No!”

“Sure~” Sanji cajoled playfully, making his way up the stairs as he crooned, “Little directionless vegetable.”

“I'll show you a directionless vegetable, you dumb curly frickin'...” Zoro grumbled angrily before he trailed off, having absolutely no idea where he was planning on heading with that insult. Turning back to the dry dishes, he continued to put them away as he was relieved that Sanji had been out of ear shot and had not heard him. Setting the last of the cups on the shelf before trudging over to one of the chairs and falling into it; the day finally taking its toll on him.

Out of habit he found himself tracking the other man's movements upstairs, and it wasn't long before he heard the bathroom door opening once more. However, the footsteps seemed to falter, and when no sound of him descending the stairs could be heard Zoro found himself glancing over in interest. Slowly pushing himself to his feet and making his way over to the staircase, not wanting the blond to think him paranoid but also curious as to why the man wouldn't come down stairs.

Reaching the top floor, he passed by the bathroom – whose door stood open – as he neared his office
space where Sanji was easily spotted standing in the doorway. Looking around at all the bottled ships with a mesmerized expression on his face, clearly so absorbed that he didn't even hear Zoro approaching.

“Hey.” Zoro muttered, making himself known.

“Oh! Hey!” Sanji said through a startled jump, Zoro enjoying the guilty way Sanji began fumbling over his words as his hands began waving erratically in front of himself. Smirk reaching his lips as he genuinely got to see the blond out of his element for the first time, “Sorry, I didn't mean... I was just walking by and the door was open.”

“It's fine.” Zoro finally grunted, releasing Sanji from his tortured embarrassment despite the fact that he would have enjoyed watching the blond grasp around like that all day. Relief lighting up the blond's face as he once more turned back to looking around the small workshop and all the finished ships lining the walls.

“You collect?” Sanji asked absently, nearing one of the larger one's as he raised onto his toes to peer down onto the deck to get a better look.

“Make them.” Zoro shrugged modestly, shoving his hands into his pockets as he continued to watch the way Sanji excitedly inspected each ship. No one had ever really seen them before – aside from his wife – and he had always just assumed that most people would find them as dull as she did; it certainly wasn't an exciting hobby.

“You...” Sanji started numbly, eyes still dancing across the room in awe before finally levelling on Zoro, “You made all these?”

Zoro just offered a shy nod.

“These are incredible!” Sanji grinned broadly, a sincerity to his words that seemed far too excited and genuine for something so mundane. Turning back to the one he had been eyeing earlier and reaching out a hand, he cast a glance back at Zoro, “May I?”

Zoro shrugged with an encouraging smile.

The ships, accessories, and everything else was all properly glued down, unless Sanji decided to give
it a good shake then it wasn't likely that anything would fall apart. Zoro watched as Sanji carefully picked up the bottle and began turning it over in his dexterous hands, long fingers shifting the container around as he continued to inspect the ship from all angles. A familiar warmth had once more sparked in Zoro's chest as he couldn't help the surge of happiness at how genuinely interested the other man was in what he had made.

“This is indescribable.” Sanji murmured as he carefully turned the bottle over in his hands to inspect the underside of the ship as well, “It's gorgeous.

“You can have it.” The words had left Zoro's mouth before he had even known he had uttered them, eyes widening nearly as much as Sanji’s did as when finally realizing what he had said. That warm sensation taking hold as he didn't want to loose that feeling, desperate to say anything that might keep it alive.

“Oh, no.” Sanji immediately shook his head and made to place it back on the shelf, “I couldn't.”

“Seriously,” Zoro intoned as he gently reached out to place a hand on the bottle to keep Sanji from placing it on the shelf, shoving it back towards the man. Attempting an aloof nature to hopefully mask the odd happiness that was threatening to make him smile like an idiot, “I have too many anyway; need shelf space.”

“Well...” Sanji floundered for a moment – still holding the bottle – before finally seeming to sense that there was no use arguing over it as he conceded, “I don't know what to say...”

“A thank you is usually customary.”

“Was that a joke?” Sanji snorted, raising an eyebrow, “You making jokes now?”

Smirking wryly, Zoro gave a noncommittal shrug.

“You know...” Sanji mused, following Zoro out of the room as he continued to cradle the bottle in his arms as delicately as possible, “I don't know why you don't have more friends; your dry wit is quite attractive.”

Zoro couldn't quite place why he felt a tiny rush at the odd compliment, but he accepted it graciously by keeping his back to the man as they descended the stairs. Offering just a quirk of his head in
response as he honestly didn't have an answer to the blond's question; not many people seemed to understand that a lot of his flat statements were actually just facetious comments.

“Maybe you got lost and couldn't find them?” Sanji mused seriously from behind him.

Zoro reached the bottom of the stairs, turned, and looked back up at the blond flatly, “Get out of my house.”

“That's it, isn't it?!” Sanji exclaimed with a gasp of mocking realization.

Both of them making their way to the front door as Sanji just continued to laugh harder at his own running joke and Zoro couldn’t do more than roll his eyes at the behaviour. Fighting back a smile and losing as he just opted for opening the door and jerking his head out of the portal, “Go home.”

“Okay! Okay...” Sanji conceded, finally seeming to calm down as he finished pulling on his shoes and stepping outside, before turning back to Zoro and reaching out a concerned hand. Face turning rigid as he murmured seriously, “Don't go anywhere while I'm gone; we can't have you getting lost.”

Zoro just responded by flicking the door closed in the still cackling blond's face, listening as the laughter followed him well down the driveway until he finally got into his car. Even after the car pulled out and Zoro had spent the next hour cleaning up the final evidence of all the people that had just been in his house he could still hear Sanji's cheerful laughter.

TBC...

Chapter End Notes

I know some people will find the idea of Zoro not drinking VERY weird, and trust me I was heavily debating it for a while. However, a lot of people dealing with PTSD tend to stray towards alcoholism(and other addictions) to deal with it, and I wanted to incorporate that struggle into Zoro's life as well. Over the course of the fic a lot of things will be addressed and of course resolved; so I hope anyone reading will understand. Thank you for reading, and I hope you enjoy.
Bulls-eye

When Zoro awoke, he felt an unpleasant pressure pounding from the inside of his skull, temples splitting with a massive headache. Eyes flickering open to discover he was hanging upside down. Blood draining into his brain and causing a severe migraine that was making it difficult for him to remember how he got here, and it took even longer to notice the man that was making his way over.

Shaking his head in an attempt to get a better grip on himself, he noted the greasy man approaching as the memory of his capture came flooding back with embarrassing clarity. Groaning in annoyance as the agent came to a stop in front of Zoro and began sneering down at him, “Roronoa.”

“Galdino.” Zoro muttered back politely, letting his bound hands fall to hang below his head as he watched the sleazy man with thinly veiled contempt. Despite having dropped his guard enough to get him jumped in an ambush, it was easy to see that the man didn’t see Zoro as a threat at the moment; his first mistake.

“Hope you find the accommodations comfortable?” Galdino simpered.

“Ngh.” Zoro grunted noncommittally, eyes already zeroing in on the knife in the man’s hands that was no doubt meant for him. The large bucket and tarp on the floor beneath him the real tip off that it wouldn’t be long until that knife was going to be drawing across his neck. It was only a question of when.

“I mean it obviously doesn’t matter since you’re going to be bled like a farm animal in a moment, right?” Galdino continued congenially; talking about cutting Zoro open as casually as one would when talking about the weather. Walking a lazy circle around the green-haired man as he was obviously riffed with a pride at managing to get Zoro into such a position.

Zoro just rolled his eyes.

“You know I was thinking of doing it slowly...” Galdino mused, crouching down to be more on Zoro’s level as he pointed the blade uncomfortably close to Zoro’s jugular, “But I realized it would be way more fun seeing the panic in your eyes as you struggl--"

Arms swiping up in an aggressive jab, Zoro managed to knock the knife from the man’s grasp and snatch it out of the air as he slammed his head forward into the still yammering man’s nose. As Galdino fell to the floor in pain Zoro pulled himself up and slashing the knife across his bonds around his ankles with little regard for himself as the ropes gave way and he was falling to the floor.

Rolling out of the impact, he sprang to his feet, and expertly cutting the rope binding his wrists before launching himself at his captor without a moment of hesitation. Blade poised expertly in his hand as he caught the still disoriented operative from behind.

Hand clamping over his mouth to muffle the scream at the same time he embedded the man’s own blade deep into his guts, twisting it for good measure to make sure the man wouldn’t live through his wounds. Continuing to twist the blade deeper as the man struggled in Zoro’s hold until he eventually went limp and Zoro released him where he fell to the ground with a wet smack.

The sound registering as odd to his ears before glancing down with a hazy shake of his head and finding himself standing in a pool of blood as he slowly realized that it was his own. Noting the cuts to both his ankles that he had cut deeper than he had intended when he had cut the ropes to free himself. Dark garnet staining his skin and oozing out from the cuts in dangerous amounts.
“Shit.” Zoro mumbled faintly, tumbling to the floor and into the pool of his own blood, only barely able to find the distress signal in his pocket and turning it on before succumbing to the blackness once more.

~X~

Alarm clock went off at the usual time as Zoro had slowly acclimated to the oddity of allowing a machine to wake him rather than his own senses. It had now been a couple weeks since he hadn't been awoken by his own incessant need to rise before the sun crested the small town mountains. Letting go of that small aspect of control had been a little disconcerting at first, but a session with Robin had quickly turned it into something rather significant; instead of feeling dejected, he was actually proud of his minute progress towards suburban normalcy.

Workout finished and running shoes on, he made his way down the usual route until he neared the end of the subdivision where Sanji stood waiting. Hands clasped above his head as he arched back with a languished stretch, one arm dropping as the motion turned into a wave of greeting as Zoro neared. Their daily runs another new aspect to his lifestyle that he normally would've found tedious, but instead gave him a sense of grateful melancholy. It reminded him of his younger days in the army when he would wake up and go running with the other cadets; back when everything was so damn simple.

It had been quite some time since he had been required to pay such close attention to his surroundings as he ran, let alone have to make a conscious effort. Running with a partner – with Sanji – kept him mentally aware enough the entire time that even if they weren't talking he was able to stay present with little effort. In fact, his need to pay meticulous attention to as many details as possible had decreased drastically in the past few weeks.

There hadn't been anymore episodes since his initial one a couple months ago and his therapist had been quite impressed with the progress he had made. A heavy compliment as the woman was not often keen to hand out such high praise so easily. All in all the past couple weeks of his life had taken a large turn for the better and Zoro found himself even beginning to enjoy his new life; which was an interesting turn of events.

As they reached the path that began circling the lake Sanji picked up the pace as they started to race around the water. The whole thing that had initially began as a stubborn competition had now turned into a daily ritual. Darting past the old couple always out for their walk as they remained neck and neck for a portion of the path until Sanji began inching ahead. By the time they had reached the end they were both sprinting at break neck speeds before Sanji darted past the marker first.

“Beat 'chya.” Sanji crowed victoriously, throwing his arms above his head even though he was still panting after their rigorous race. Dropping them to jerk his thumbs at himself while boasting, “Whose got to two thumbs and can out run a CIA agent; this guy.”

The gloating was remarkably dulled by the fact that a moment later the blond had his hands on his knees and was gasping for breath once more. Sweat coating his face and dripping down his nose, as most of his hair had come loose from its tie and was now sticking to his face in a wet mess.

“I don't need to be able to outrun you,” Zoro murmured through his own heaving breaths, keeping a steady gaze locked on Sanji. “Just catch you.”

That comment seemed to catch the blond off guard as his eyebrows jumped and his eyes widened dramatically, jaw going somewhat slack for a moment as he stared at Zoro. Tongue darting out to run across his lower lip imperceptibly before finally recovering and attempting to laugh the threat off.
“Alright. Alright.” Sanji placated Zoro with a teasing wave and a wink, a little more recovered this time as began to walk at a steady pace to properly cool down as Zoro followed, “But if I were an agent you wouldn't be able to outrun me.”

It was a testament to their relationship that Zoro was no longer silently thrown by the eccentric blond’s behaviour and was able to smirk right back at him and murmur, “I don't run.”

“No once?” Sanji prodded skeptically.

“No once.” Zoro affirmed seriously, keeping his gaze straight ahead of himself as his breathing returned to normal as well. Idly forcing himself to not think about the hundreds of times he had foolishly stood his ground and the times that it had not exactly been a wise decision.

“Okay, but I still think I'd make a half decent agent.” Sanji shifted the topic back to lighter territory, back of his hand hitting Zoro's shoulder playfully as he implored, “No one could get away from me.”

“You would be useful.” Zoro granted with a small chuckle. Sanji rolling his eyes at the playful tone and elbowing the man in the arm as they continued to finish their cool down lap around the park. Nearing the end of the loop, they came to a stop where the paths diverged and they typically parted ways. “Day off?”

“Naw.” Sanji glanced down at his watch before back up, “Gotta head home and sleep; then get up for a fourteen hour shift.”

“Sounds rough.” Zoro noted politely.

“It's not so bad,” Sanji defended with an innocent shrug, waving a vague hand as he explained, “We keep a pot of coffee ready and when it's slow we just watch re-runs in the lounge.”

“Productive.”

“Hey.” Sanji warned teasingly, “I'll have you know we're ready to go at a moments notice in case someone decides to jump in front of a truck, or anything else ridiculous like that.”

That comment was rewarded with a wry smile from Zoro whom shook his head lightly and brought his arms up to cross over his chest. Watching the delightedly grinning blond as the smile softened, always enjoying their banter, but somehow liking the way Sanji's face lit up when teasing even more.

“What about you?” Sanji asked, pulling the tie free from his hair and beginning to fix the mass of sweaty hair. Hands raking it back until he was able to wrap it back up into a messy bun with bangs still falling and curling into his eyes, “Any plans?”

Holding up his casted arm, Zoro replied, “Getting it changed.”

“Good.” Sanji muttered, releasing the tie with a snap and lowering his hands while making a disgusted face, “Cuz you smell like rotting vegetables.”

“Oi.” Zoro muttered in warning, playful smirk belying the threatening tone.

“Wouldn't be surprised if you had some mould growing in there, Mossy.” Sanji continued, disregarding Zoro's tone – which had made greater men quake in their boots – turning to leave with a cheery smile as he waved, “See ya!”

Rolling his eyes at Sanji's teasing, he smiled fondly and waved farewell as he watched the blond turn and run off in the direction of his own apartment. Zoro watching him leave as he wondered if he was
loosing his touch with his menacing tone, or if Sanji was just an oblivious idiot.

~X~

“I was told to ask for Dr. Chopper?” Zoro politely requested to the nurse stationed behind the reception desk. Chopper having insisted taking over for his previous doctor and Zoro hardly having any complaints in the matter. Grateful that he could get the cast changed and then hopefully in a couple more weeks taken off completely.

“Mr. Roronoa?” She inquired.

Zoro nodded.

“Ah, yes.” She nodded, “I’ll page him now; he'll see you in a moment. If you go wait in room 3.”

Following the nurses orders, he ended up down a hallway with a dead end, before getting escorted by a nurse whom found him. Taking him by the shoulders and practically shoving him into the room with an order to wait before closing the door. Not sure how it was in any way his fault that the room wasn't where the receptionist said it was as he took a seat to wait. It wasn't long before the door came bursting open to announce Chopper's arrival.

“Zoro!” Chopper crowed excitedly upon seeing him, the young doctor scurrying in to happily greet Zoro with the enthusiasm of a young child. Face lighting up in innocent glee which made Zoro wonder how someone who barely knew him could possibly be so genuinely excited to see him.

“Hey Chopper.” Zoro greeted back with a small chuckle, unsure what he had done to deserve such kindness from these people that had only been strangers several weeks ago. More and more it seemed like a blessing that he had dropped that coffee on the street that afternoon and gotten the chance to meet Sanji. “How’ve you been?”

“Can't complain!” Chopper replied happily, already bustling about the room, “Ready to get that cast off?”

“Absolutely.”

It didn't take long for Chopper to expertly remove the cast from his arm – quickly cleaning it and adding an antiseptic – before Chopper was setting about putting the new one on. Soon he had a pristine white cast on in replacement of the old one, albeit a little snug since it was still new. In no time at all he was finished and ready to leave.

Offering his hand which Chopper took, as Zoro gave a firm shake and murmured, “Thank you, Chopper. You always do such an amazing job.”

Chopper began gushing furiously as Zoro just watched the younger man with a fond smile, before using the distraction to make his exit. Hand on the door knob as he was being called back with a nearly distraught tone.

“Wait! You have to keep your cast.” Chopper insisted earnestly as he scurried forward, shoving the bag containing the rank bit of plaster into Zoro's hands as he urged, “It's good luck.”

“I will.” Zoro chuckled, taking the bag from the doctor with a light chuckle. Still not entirely sure what the superstition was about, but admittedly fond of the signature covered plaster from his new friends, “Don't worry.”

“Take it easy on that arm.” Chopper called after him, “Only a few more weeks!”
Zoro gave a Chopper a polite wave and a consoling smile, silently promising the doctor he would try not to do anything stupid to it in the upcoming weeks. Making his way out of the hospital with a soft smile unable to leave his face thanks to Chopper's adorable worrying. Hopping into his truck, he revved the engine before wheeling out of the parking lot as it seemed like now was a better time than ever to take the vehicle by to Franky's and follow up on his promise to bring it by for a tune.

~X~

A couple days later Zoro found himself in the basement going through his monthly ritual of maintenance for his various rifles, and miscellaneous weapons before storing them once more. It seemed like a ridiculous task since he hadn't used any of them in years, but it was imperative to him that they remained in pristine condition, especially considering the sentimental value of some of them.

It wasn't something he necessarily needed to do, but they tended to collect a bit of dust over the months of misuse so it was good to keep him in prime condition mostly out of respect more than anything. It was also a mundane, repetitive task that was calming for him to zone out while doing, but was also quite helpful with keeping him grounded. The familiar motions, and unique sensations were therapeutic, the whole thing grounding him but also keeping him connected to his past.

Distantly he heard a knock at the front door, Kalifa answering it and pleasant conversation following that was muffled by the floorboards. It was probably the Home Owner's Association stopping by to bother them with a new issue, or maybe even one of her friends coming by to visit for a while.

Knowing it didn't likely concern him, he continued uninterrupted and knew that if he was needed then she would call for him.

When the basement door opened, Zoro was initially surprised at what it could possibly be about, but upon hearing the distinct gait of the male paramedic coming down the stairs he calmed. Continuing with what the task at hand as he knew the blond had no problem making himself at home; the past couple months had proven that.

"Your lovely wife said you'd be down here 'polishing your guns'.” Sanji explained as he continued down the stairs tentatively as he cast a casual glance around, “I honestly couldn't tell if she was using an innuendo or not.”

“She doesn't joke.” Zoro noted absently, just finishing with installing the slide back on the handgun currently in his hand and eyeing the sights to make sure they were accurate. Giving it a final once over before setting it down on the bench next to the several other guns he was in process of cleaning.

“Oh, wow.” Sanji balked as he neared the massive work bench lining the wall of the room, eyes skittering across all of the weapons in nervous awe, “You have a lot of guns...”

“Used to have more.” Zoro muttered, pushing himself up from his desk and nabbing a discarded rag from nearby to clean some of the grease off his hands. Working it between his fingers and across his palm, getting most of it off before tossing it aside to be washed later.

“Yeaaah,” Sanji drawled sardonically, eyeing Zoro out of the corner of his eye as he muttered, “see most people barely have one.”

Zoro just shrugged. Sanji was well aware of what his previous occupation had been, and while he might not know the details, it was pretty obvious that he wouldn't have only a couple guns. Realizing he hadn’t left Sanji with really anywhere to go, Zoro attempted to further the conversation by asking absently, “You have any?”
“Obviously not.” Sanji snorted.

“You've never shot a gun?” Zoro inquired curiously, the notion somewhat perplexing to him. While it was something he had actually been forced to cover with Robin in one of their first sessions, the notion was still so odd to him after existing in a world of nothing but gunfire and artillery.

“I'm more in the business of saving lives rather than taking them.” Sanji replied facetiously, before giving a much more companionable shrug, “So, that'd be a no.”

Zoro remained quiet for several long moments as his thoughts began racing with an idea that he hadn't thought about in nearly three years. A trepidation washing over him as he stared down at the heavy metal that had only moments ago been clasped in his hand as an old spark of excitement was rekindled and he was turning on the blond with an offer, “Do you want to?”

~X~

“So...” Sanji broached delicately, clearly trying to word his next question carefully as he continued watching Zoro set everything up. Having driven far out into the country to shoot at some targets set up along a gravel pit, “Shooting is a... hobby, of yours?”

“Used to be.” Zoro admitted simply as he finished lining up the magazines along the table in front of the two men. Double checking their spacing as he picked up the larger hand gun from the end of the table and did a quick assessment over the components.

Grateful that he had not broken his left arm as it would have been much more of a hassle to get back into the habit using his non-dominant hand. Once he was certain that the firearm was up to his standards, he cocked it once to get a feel for the stiffness before popping the trigger to reset the weapon. Setting down the gun he glanced at Sanji, jerking his head at the ear protection that he held in his hands to signal the man to put them on before turning back to the table.

Putting in the pair of earplugs felt weird – especially since he had long since given himself tinnitus several years ago – but for Sanji's sake he followed procedure. Placing the safety glasses on as he hoped that maybe the muffled noise would help keep him from having a relapse. Even though this was just casual, Zoro was currently trying everything to keep himself from hyperventilating at what he was about to do.

It had been nearly three years since he had shot a gun – and while it used to be the most exhilarating feeling in the world to him – it had been a long time since it had become a source of fear and tarnished memories. Casting a glance over to check on the blond, he found him grinning readily and giving a cheery thumbs up. Not at all aware at the dorky way his hair was standing up thanks to the larger earmuffs Zoro had given him.

Fighting back a chuckle, he snatched up the gun once more as the heady weight in his hand was suddenly far more palpable than it had been moments earlier. The rough pattern on the grip biting into his palm as it brought back bittersweet memories of when he barely went a day without firing a pistol. Addicted to the taste of gunpowder that now was more likely to cause him to have a panic attack.

Picking up the first magazine off the table with barely trembling fingers, he slid it in with practised ease before bring it over to his right arm currently confined by a sling. Cocking it, and then raising it towards the target at the far end of the empty field where it sat innocently against the large wall of dirt.

Choking back any last vestiges of nervousness he pulled the trigger with practised surety, a crack
rung out sharply throughout the open field as the bullet sailed across the field to embed in the paper. Only instead of hitting with a sharp crack, it embedded with a heavy thud as suddenly the field twisted into a shadowed nightmare as a young man stood just in front of the target. Body rigid with shock as a pained look tore across his face as the bullet entered his chest.

A second later the memory was gone and Zoro was left standing back in the sunlit field as a choked gasp caught in his throat and the gun in his hand trembled furiously. He could sense tension from his right where Sanji stood and had no doubt noticed something was amiss, as Zoro huffed out a furious breath from his nose and readjusted his grip with intent. Using all of his willpower to redirect the memory like his therapist had taught him, as his thoughts turned to Sanji and how he didn't want to have a breakdown in front of him.

Without even a second of hesitation this time, he pulled the trigger eleven more times with deadly precision as he angled the gun down range and fired on the first target. When the magazine was empty he brought the gun up with a swift motion as his thumb flicked the release to let the empty magazine fall to his feet before slamming the gun down on the table over the next mag.

Inserting it into the gun in the one fluid motion he brought it to his hip, pressing the slide into his thigh and cocking the gun in one smooth motion before bringing it up to fire twelve more consecutive shots at the next target. The time between unloading the magazine, and inserting the new one taking less than a second as his military training was still fresh enough in his mind to keep his reaction time nearly inhuman.

Fire, empty, insert, cock, fire.

Third magazine emptied into the third target as Zoro had the last magazine sliding out of the gun with little more than a practised twitch of his thumb, before putting it down carefully on the table and finally turning to face the blond. The man in question was still frozen staring at the table with his jaw hanging a little too open to pass for simply impressed, he seemed to be going for downright floored.

Removing their protective gear, Sanji pulled off the earmuffs with a flick of his tousled hair before rounding on Zoro and balking, “What the hell?”

“What?” Zoro shrugged honestly, removing his own earplugs as he looked back up at the blond that was still staring at the gun on the table in awe. A pang of nervousness overcame him as he wondered if Sanji was referring to minor freak out he had had moments before; he had really been hoping Sanji would ignore it.

“What do you mean 'what'?!?” Sanji squawked indignantly, jerking back with an aggressive wave of his arm, “You can't just casually do something that cool and then pretend I'm over-reacting.”

A laugh started to shake Zoro's frame which eventually turned into a full on guffaw as he realized that despite his anxiety, his loss of control, and all his self doubt; Sanji was still somehow impressed. It was ridiculously endearing of the other man, but Zoro's laughter just seemed to annoy Sanji further as he seemed ready to argue for a moment, hand gesturing towards the gun and then down range at the targets hopelessly before seeming to give up.

Eventually Zoro's laughter died down and he went about double checking that the guns were all unloaded and the safeties were on before they made their way down the field to the three targets. A bit of a trek, but they were soon standing in front of the massive gravel dugout and were able to inspect the papers up close.

Sanji gushed sharply as the bullet marks came into sight, “Holy shit.”
Ignoring the blond, Zoro couldn't help but feel slightly disappointed over how sloppy he had gotten in the past three years. Not only were the marks all over the ten, but one or two of them were even outside in the ninth. These were rookie shots that would make the difference between a kill shot to the heart and a puncture to the shoulder. Back in his prime he would have gotten between the zero of the ten with every single shot. Now, it seemed he was reduced to nothing more than a casual recreational shooter.

“What's with that look?” Sanji prodded incredulously.

“How?” Zoro glanced over at the blond, once again noting the look of shock on the man's face and unable to fathom how Sanji could possibly be impressed by this. Instead of flattering, it just seemed degrading; Sanji seeing him at his worst and somehow thinking it was worthy of compliment?

“You look disappointed.”

Zoro shrugged, attempting to brush off Sanji's excitement. Not worthy of the blond's praise when he could barely get through a round without having a panic attack, “Used to be better.”

“Better?” Sanji balked, glancing at the targets incredulously before back at Zoro with an outrageous expression, “How? They're all on the ten!”

“This is a one inch grouping at fifty yards.” Zoro explained as he circled the tight group of bullet marks with his finger before dropping his arm and grumbled to himself, “Embarrassing...”

“Okay, listen here, grumpy.” Sanji snorted, walking forward until Zoro's attention fully turned to him before ordering sharply, “I don't know what fantasy land you live in where you need to be upset about this, but in the real world with us here normal folk; you're a damned good shot.”

Zoro smiled softly at Sanji's attempt at consoling him, the notion far more touching than the actual words. Sanji was right, of course, and they were the same things that his therapist stated over and over to him. It was a past life; he shouldn't be upset about it anymore. But despite how right everyone was, no one seemed to understand how painfully hard it was for him to let go a part of himself that had been there since the very beginning.

“How about this...” Sanji offered tentatively, his cautious words drawing Zoro out of his reverie as he glanced up at the man that was currently watching him, “I'll come out with you to practise so you can get your game back, and in return you can teach me how to shoot; sound fair?”

Zoro just stood for a long moment staring at the other man, not entirely understanding what the man was offering and why. Starting to wonder just how much emotion had been revealed on his face earlier to have Sanji offering to do such a favour for him.

“Yeah... alright.” Zoro conceded, an air of excitement beginning to rise in his chest as the thought only continued to fill him with more and more happiness. He'd been so scared of shooting alone for so long thanks to the memories, but maybe if he had Sanji there to at least distract him enough to keep relatively calm then he could do this. Robin had wanted him to get a hobby, maybe this was the right goal to get his motivation back on track...

“Awesome!” Sanji announced firmly, waving a hand at the targets, “Now, let's put up some new ones and let me give it a go!”

Conceding with a nod, they tore down the old targets and replaced them with a couple new ones for Sanji to test his luck with. Heading back down the range shortly after and returning to the table as Zoro snatched up the gun he had just used and began to explain how to use it.
“Hold out your right hand.” Zoro requested and when Sanji did as ordered, he carefully placed the empty gun into the blond’s palm to allow him to get used to the weight of it. Eyebrows climbing as Sanji took a very amateur grip on the gun – keeping his finger off the trigger – while attempting to adjust it properly.

Coming around to Sanji's right side he attempted to show the blond how to properly hold it despite not having his own right hand to demonstrate with. Keeping himself a bit behind the man, he carefully reached out to fix the gun’s placement so it sat nice and low in the blond's palm, “You want the to choke up as high as you can on the grip; you'll feel less recoil that way.”

“Makes sense.” Sanji agreed easily.

“Thumb and finger parallel to the gun.” Zoro instructed as he reached out to nab Sanji’s left hand and began placing it on the grip around the other, “Then place the palm along the area of the grip still not covered by your other hand.”

“You don't want to be holding too tight, and you don't want to be too low and cradling the bottom.” Zoro explained as he picked up one of the magazines he had used and began refilling it. Keeping his gaze on Sanji as the blond stood by the table and raised the gun down range to get used to the feel, lowering it at Zoro’s advice and turning on him with a grin.

“Thanks for the tips, but I already know how to stroke a cock.” Sanji commented dryly.

A bright flush climbed up Zoro's neck far quicker than he had expected at the inappropriate comment, hand slipping as several bullets bounced off the mag and onto the ground. Coughing thickly to recover, he retrieved them and finished loading the magazine, offering it to the blond while still keeping his gaze minutely averted.

Sanji clearly enjoyed throwing Zoro off, but refrained from making any more dick jokes as Zoro finished going over everything else. From the safety, to loading, and to finally firing. Once done they both donned their ear protection, and Zoro took a step back to give the blond room.

The blond took several moments to get ready before firing the first shot with a little hesitation, obviously surprised by the kick, but not overwhelmed. Continuing on to fire the other eleven shots with some of them causing bursts of dirt to spring up around the target as he missed a couple. With the first mag finished, Sanji unloaded it and placed it on the table before turning to Zoro with a wide smile.

“That wasn't as bad as I thought it'd be!” Sanji yelled at Zoro, speaking far too loudly as a result of the ear plugs. Zoro couldn't help but smile as Sanji loaded the second mag into the gun, cocked it, and then turned his attention to the targets once more.

The initial crack of gun fire causing the hairs on Zoro's arms to stand on end as tension kept his spine rigid, but it wasn't nearly as triggering as he had thought it'd be. Zoro wasn't quite sure what was keeping him so grounded at he moment, but it was a great improvement compared to the last few times he had attempted to be around firearms.

As Sanji finished up with the last target, they removed there safety equipment and Zoro checked over the gun quickly before they began making their way down range. Even though Sanji had hit the targets some of the time, he knew a large portion of them had also decorated the gravel around the posters. “We can move the targets closer?”

“And attempt to humiliate me further?” Sanji balked indignantly, “I think not.”
Upon reaching the three targets, it was clear that once Sanji had gotten used to the aim and the weight of the gun his aim had drastically improved. The last one looking actually incredibly good from someone whom had never shot a gun before as Zoro admitted, “It's not bad.”

“Really?” Sanji raised his eyebrows incredulously at Zoro before glancing back at his target where there was a decent size grouping decorating the far left corner. While it was no where near the bullseye, they were at least all in the same area, “Are you sure you're not blind?”

“First try; that distance.” Zoro noted, “It's definitely not bad.”

“Well shit.” Sanji gloated haughtily, waving an airy hand about as he began speaking to no one in particular as Zoro began pulling down the old targets, “You hear that ladies; the CIA says I'm 'not bad'.”

“Alright, Casanova.” Zoro snorted, finishing hanging up the new targets and beckoning the preening blond after him with a crooked finger, “Let's try something with a bit more kick.”

~X~

Summer night left the air humid as they drove back into town along the dark, deserted country road. A few rays of light still stretching desperately over the distant hilltops as they drove in a comfortable silence. Sanji had the window rolled down, eyes closed as he enjoyed the light breeze that helped break the stifling heat that had been present all day. A cigarette held lazily in his hand while Zoro kept his eyes pinned to the road as he handled the steering wheel of the truck casually in his unbroken arm while still a little torn up about the day's earlier events.

There was still a war of frustration waging in him that he didn't think would ever truly go away despite how long he lived; always haunted by the memory of what he had been, compared to what he was now. However, a newly awakened part of him had been thrilled at the aspect of shooting for simple enjoyment. For the first time in his life going out and using a gun without the pressure of needing it to be perfect for the sake of his own life and others. Not to mention being able to share that with someone else.

Eyes flicking over to Sanji whom still had his eyes shut as he brought the smoke in for a smooth drag before pulling it away. Allowing it to hang from the window for a few moments before he exhaled a long stream of smoke that was caught up in the rustling breeze and taken out the window.

It had been odd to have Sanji be so reciprocating about his passion despite having never done it before, and it had been even more surprising to have Sanji offer to accompany him to do it more. Zoro hadn't thought he had put off such a disgruntled vibe earlier, but it was also apparent that Sanji was an incredibly perceptive person.

Though it also meant there was a likelihood that Sanji suspected something was up with him – as a medical professional how could he not – what with the scars and the way he acted around loud noises. It would be rude for him to not at least come out and tell the man, since he no doubt saw the way Zoro had reacted the first time he had pulled the trigger. However, apart from his therapist and his wife he had never really said the words out loud...

The first time Zoro opened his mouth nothing came which was embarrassing, but it came as a relief that Sanji still had his eyes closed. Closing his mouth, he tried to calm his raging heartbeat as he attempted to rationalize that this wasn't that big of a deal and that Sanji likely new anyway. Heart still pounding against his rib cage for reasons beyond his knowledge, he steeled himself and opened his mouth once more.
“I have PTSD.” Zoro admitted quietly, the word sounding odd and foreign on his tongue as it was the first time he had admitted to what was effecting him in years. Mostly he had just referred to everything as episodes, or incidents, but for some reason he found that honesty was the best course of action for Sanji.

A long silence stretched throughout the car as Zoro was beginning to fear he had made a huge mistake, too terrified to turn and see Sanji’s uncomfortable expression that he vividly focused on the road ahead of him. Knuckles whitening as he tightened his grip on the wheel, leather creaking softly as he twisted his hands in agitation.

“I know.” Sanji finally conceded lightly, which caused Zoro to cast his first glance at the man in several minutes in shock as he found the blond sitting as casual as ever in the passengers seat. Cigarette still hanging out the window, but this time his eyes were on Zoro and just watching him softly.

Eyes flicking back to the road, Zoro wondered aloud albeit very rhetorically, “How?”

“I’ve known since we first met.” Sanji explained gently, “When you dropped the coffee...”

“Oh...” Zoro noted quietly, having expected that answer from the very beginning, but also feeling weird at finally hearing it from Sanji’s mouth. His gut churning with the horrible thought that perhaps everything Sanji had done up until now had been some deranged form of pity.

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“I’m not.” Zoro replied stiffly, his tone laced with annoyance that he immediately regretted. It was hard to stop himself from getting defensive over something so trivial, but Sanji had no idea the burden it had placed on him, the devastating end it had caused to his previous life. When the silence between them had once more grown to uncomfortable lengths he snapped, “You’re not gonna ask me about it?”

“Do you want to tell me?” Sanji answered without missing a beat, the sincerity in his tone so genuine it was practically painful. Zoro’s previous agitation and anger deflating from him all at once as he knew without even asking that none of what Sanji was doing was out of pity; it was just who he was. Kind. Caring. Albeit a little pushy...

“Not particularly.” Zoro admitted honestly.

“Then I won’t.” A simple shrug and the blond was looking back out the window with the full intent of letting the subject go, a trait that he would never stop appreciating in Sanji. They continued the rest of the ride in a much more companionable silence and for some reason Zoro felt as though a large weight had just been removed from his shoulders.

~X~

Arriving home after the day, Zoro found himself trekking tiredly up the stairs to spend the evening in his small workshop. Back in the quaint room he stared at the empty space on the wall as he realized he would now need to make something to replace it. An idea hitting him as he glanced down at the bag he had discarded underneath the desk a few days prior.

Pulling out the old cast, he placed it up on the shelf where the old ship used to be, now replaced with the item of good luck bestowed upon him by his newfound friends. All of their signatures displayed proudly from the mantled; the battleship from Usopp’s kids, the dragon from Luffy, all of their names, and the curly flourish of Sanji’s name directly in the middle...
A spark of inspiration hit him as he made his decision and began packing up and moving all the pieces of the half finished ship. Taking a seat, he snatched up the discarded spectacles that he left on his work bench as he began pulling out all the pieces he’d need to begin constructing a new hull. The ship he had in mind already a clear image as he set about making the new ship.

An hour or two passed where he worked in complete silence, managing to get most of the hull constructed before Kalifa eventually returned home. The woman making her was into his workshop silently and watching him work, before glancing around his work space.

“Where'd your ship go?” Kalifa inquired with a hint of concern, motioning to the shelf with a jerk of her chin when Zoro turned to her. Head swivelling up to note the blank space where the ship he had given Sanji used to sit, now housing the cast he had placed there.

Glancing back at Kalifa with a shrug, he explained, “Gave it away.”

“Really?” She intoned softly, eyebrows climbing curiously as she had come to understand how much they had meant to Zoro since he had first begun making them. Obviously she was a little surprised that Zoro had suddenly had the urge to get rid of one of them; let alone his favourite.

“It caught Sanji’s eye.” Zoro muttered offhandedly, waving an idle hand towards the shelf as he feigned an air of indifference – honestly still a little surprised at his own behaviour – while continuing, “Figured I had too many anyway.”

“Huh.” Kalifa made a quiet noise of understanding, still clearly a little taken aback at Zoro's suddenly sociable nature before a soft smile touched her face. All of her features warming as she reached out to touch his chin and guide his face upwards to face her as she murmured, “How kind of you.”

Zoro remained silent, watching her gaze glimmer with excitement before she was leaning forward and placed her lips over his in a needy kiss. It had been a while since she had come to him for this, but he found himself reacting swiftly as an inexplicable arousal had been awoken in him that he hadn't been able to smother. However, it wasn't until he had closed his eyes and leaned into the kiss that he realized how badly he was craving it.

Careful of his injured arm, he scooped the woman up and carried her down the hall and towards their room. Continuing the kiss as she reciprocated with an eagerness that he hadn't remembered her having in quite some time. Their clothes discarded in moments as they were falling back into the bed and Zoro began worshipping her body with a clouded arousal. Eyes falling shut as his hands roved over her lean body, mouth at her neck as he kissed and nipped at every bit of pale skin exposed to him.

Something was different tonight. Whether it had been the mentally exhausting day he had spent with Sanji, or perhaps even the exhilarating rush he had gotten from finally shooting a gun again; something had him charged and eager. Body feeling far more heated than it had in months as he continued to ravage his wife's body.

It wasn't long before he was sliding inside her and he was able to relieve some of the pent up tension that had been coiled in his gut for what felt like ages. Gasps and moans egging him on as he soon found himself edging but not quite able to finish just yet.

An urge struck him, and without warning he was pulling out – much to her surprise – before flipping her over and sliding back in. Despite the suddenness of the action, she didn't seem bothered by it and in fact was rather eager and she began riding back into him. Zoro's gaze pinned to the perfect, unmarked flesh of her rear, the slender hips rocking back onto him, and the mess of blond hair falling around her shoulders...
Reaching out his uninjured hand, he tangled it in her long, blond locks and took a commanding grip. Forcing her further into the mattress as her high pitched whines turned into muffled, guttural moans which fuelled him further as he found they were the tipping point. Holding off just long enough to reach around and stimulate her to completion as well before he was coming hard inside.

Once her shuddering had ceased and Zoro felt a little more in control of himself, he pulled out and rolled off of her to collapse in the bed. Dragging himself onto his back as Kalifa rolled over as well and they lay sprawled together for several moments just basking in the after glow and panting into the quiet room as they caught their breath. Kalifa moving first to roll towards Zoro with a playful smile, leaning on her elbow with her chin propped in her hand as she noted heatedly, “That was new.”

“Yeah...” Zoro muttered aloud, just as surprised as she was at his abnormal sexual behaviour. A thought occurring to him which he immediately shied away from as the mere idea of it was not only completely ridiculous, but not allowed. Instead, closing his eyes and pulling his wife closer into his side, burrowing his face in her silken locks and focusing on the familiar perfume as he waited for sleep to come.

TBC...

A/N: Unbetad. Maybe one day haha
Ignorance is Bliss
It was supposed to be a standard security gig. Each of them charged with covering an exit, or hallway, to make sure that no one came in or out of the building without strict permission. Everything had been going according to plan for the past several hours until an explosion rocked the building and sent everything into pandemonium.

Stations were abandoned as everything went into emergency lock down, all units trying to get towards the target as fast as possible to prepare for whomever activated the bomb. If this had merely been done to gain access to the building then there was no telling what else they had planned.

A familiar tightness had begun to form in Zoro's chest as the explosion started eliciting panicked memories from his time in the army. Explosions distantly ringing in his ears, dust hovering in thick
blankets to mask any potential threats, and the screaming of terrorized civilians distantly echoing through the streets. All of it fighting to surface in his mind far more vividly than he could possibly understand as he desperately tried staying focused on the present.

Ducking and weaving through hallways with his rifle poised and at the ready, he slowly made his way from the first floor to the second. Upon nearing the meet point he discovered the south wall was completely breached as the explosion had torn a hole through almost the entire structure. People were clamouring to get out of the building and made it nearly impossible to discern who might be a civilian and who might be a threat.

Pushing onward he found the panic in his chest was steadily growing to the point where he was struggling to breath. Firmly tell himself it was just the dust still hanging in the air from the explosion as he slowed near a corner. Taking in a few deep breaths in order to steady himself before checking if the coast was clear. Standing in the hall, panting heavily as he peered down the sights of his rifle at the empty corridor.

An aggressive hand clamped on his shoulder and Zoro turned in a panic, registering the face of a man he had met in the field once before. Slightly distorted, but quite real; his panic became twofold as he realized he had been in this exact situation with this man before. Only last time it had ended with a gunshot wound to the chest and a couple days in a coma.

For some reason the fear that had not occurred on that day hit him full force, and all at once everything around him began to distort; blackness encroached on the edges of his vision, the world warping and twisting in front of him, and everything around him pulsating with each panicked heartbeat. Breathing became nearly impossible as the rushing in his ears became painfully intense; his senses slowly failing him one by one.

Icy dread gripped his heart as he lashed out at the man immediately, desperate to change the outcome from last time. Luckily catching him off guard and sending him to the ground in one hit. Discarding his gun, Zoro immediately jumped on top of him and pinned his arms with his knees, before rearing back and planting his fist as hard as he could into the man's face.

Punches kept falling on the man long after he was dead, and much longer still after blood had coated his knuckles and obscured the features of the man he was still beating. The tightness in his chest not loosening as it felt like the only thing keeping him somewhat grounded was to keep the danger at bay by continuing to strike it. Fists trembling, but each hit landing true - over and over - until finally he was tackled from the other man.

Operatives he recognized were fighting to pin him to the ground, all of them yelling incoherent gibberish that he couldn't process past the rushing in his ears. Not understanding why the where attacking him when the man responsible was on the ground behind them.
Amidst his panicked thrashing and screaming, he managed to just catch a glimpse of his assailant from between the various bodies around him. Stilling in horror which provided the other operatives enough time to flip him over as they began restraining him. Zoro remaining lax in their aggressive grips as his cheek was pressed into the cold, stone floor; his eyes level with the cold, dead one's of one of his former partners.

~X~

Alarm waking Zoro in much the same fashion as it had for a couple weeks now; his life gaining a semblance of normalcy that wasn't entirely as awful to him as it had been a few months prior. Workouts drastically improved by occasionally having Sanji tag along depending on his work schedule, evenings continually occupied with one thing or another from his various new acquaintances, and his sex life with his wife had improved dramatically despite his firm desire to not discuss his new habits.

Everything was genuinely looking up. Which had made his recent visit to his therapist actually incredibly rewarding for once as they discussed all the progress he had made. Nightmares and episodes had ceased completely, and he was sociable enough that he had even been asked to babysit for Usopp and Kaya for an evening. However, as cute as the rascals were, it had indefinitely put Zoro off the idea of having children.

Summer had come to Merryville in full force now with sweltering days and humid nights; weekends occupied with barbecues, trips to the pool with the kids, or a day at the lake. Zoro had never really thought it possible that he'd become this sort of individual, but here was living the suburban lifestyle.

Finishing up with the dishes from this morning's breakfast, he left them in the rack to dry before getting ready to head to the shelter. Pulling open the front door swiftly, he was only slightly taken aback by the surprised blond on the other side with a fist still raised as though about to knock. Wrist going limp before he dropped his hand altogether and grinned at Zoro cheerfully, "Hey, Mosshead."

"Curly." Zoro intoned with mild amusement, raising a brow expectantly as he awaited the man's explanation for being here. Though judging from the fact that he wasn't in jogging clothes, or his work scrubs, it meant he had come by to bother Zoro. An occurrence that was becoming more common as the weeks went by, and Zoro grudgingly had to admit to himself that it was incredibly nice.

"Figured I'd see what you are up to today." Sanji explained cheerfully, hands sliding into a relaxed position in his pockets while noting Zoro's state of dress with a pointed stare, "And it looks like you are up to something."
"Don't you have other friends?" Zoro quipped flatly, intending on lightheartedly teasing the man and realizing afterwards that his tone might sound a little too dismissive. He wasn’t entirely sure what it was about Sanji’s presence, but he always found his chest fluttering happily when he was around; the only way Zoro had found helped dealing with it was to cover it up with ruthless teasing and smart comments.

Recovering his aplomb flawlessly, Sanji shrugged and without missing a beat drawled, "It’s the downside of having co-workers who are also your friends; always working when the other is off... So I came by to see what you were up to."

"Ah-uh." Zoro made a noise of understanding to placate the man, however not really able to relate to the situation at all. Stepping out onto the porch and closing the front door behind himself, watching as Sanji took a step back to give him some space. "Do you have nothing better to do?"

"Not really." Sanji shrugged with a grin.

Not that Zoro was entirely against the idea of inviting Sanji along, however his time at the shelter was what he liked to consider his alone time. Though if anyone was going to intrude on his personal time, he would be least annoyed by Sanji, "I'm going to the shelter."

"Ooh." Sanji cooed excitedly, blue eyes lighting up as he seemed genuinely enthusiastic at the prospect. The downright adorable smile making Zoro fumble his keys as he turned away to lock the door, frowning to himself as to why that would possible throw him off as Sanji urged, "Can I come?!!"

Forcing down his confusion and shaking off his scowl, Zoro turned back to Sanji with a bored demeanour and gave an innocuous shrug, "I won't stop you."

"Like you'd even want to." Sanji cajoled with a teasing wink, "You love my company."

"More like tolerate." Zoro countered, a scowl tinging his brow as he wondered why the statement tasted of a lie. Though he supposed in retrospect it was - regardless of their teasing and faux fighting - since he always felt calm happiness whenever the blond was present.

"You cut me to the core!" Sanji exclaimed dramatically, following Zoro down the quaint walkway before asking, "So, your car or mine?"
"Walk."

Sanji stopped in his tracks, head rearing back affronted, and immediately scrunched up his nose, "Gross."

"It's not that far." Zoro surmised, leaving the blond behind as he continued down the driveway.

"Ugh..." Sanji made a childish noise and Zoro could distinctly hear the blond dragging his feet across the asphalt while bemoaning, "You know why I bought a car, right?!"

"C'mon." Zoro encouraged as he began heading off down the side walk, purposefully not looking back at the man and not responding to his rhetorical question, "You could use the exercise."

"S'cuse you?!!" Sanji shouted after him indignantly, immediately abandoning dragging his feet and making childlike noises so he could sprint after him before falling into step beside Zoro and squawking, "You wanna go?!"

"It's boring if I know the outcome." Zoro murmured cockily, smirk growing and heart jumping at how riled up the blond was becoming at his comments. The blond never genuinely hurt by their banter, but always loved to overreact at the slightest comments against his character; it was quite amusing.

Between casual conversation and lighthearted bickering - which was shortly interrupted by Sanji shoving Zoro into a neighbours bush and Zoro dragging him in after which lead to a small brawl on the lawn. The whole ordeal ending with the both of them apologizing to the owner for wrecking a flower bed and Zoro promising to replant everything for her - after which they finally managed to make it to the shelter.

Sanji was already horribly preoccupied by glancing around the entryway and getting a glance through one of the windows to the small area out back where a few dogs were running around and barking happily. Zoro stepped through the secondary door and nodded in greeting to Conis before turning to the blond who had just followed him through.

"This is Con--" Zoro hadn't even had a chance to finish his introduction before Sanji was darting past him with child-like energy and sidling up to the reception desk, elbow propped on the counter as he smirked dashingly down at Conis. The petite blond looked up in timid shock at the man, her gaze
shifting wearily to Zoro and then back as Sanji began laying on his charm.

"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance," Sanji crooned, really laying it on thick as Zoro closed the door behind himself and neared the counter as well. Trying to mask a look of thinly veiled disgust and failing as the blond continued, "May I request what angelic name you must have?"

At this point Conis seemed rather more confused than worried, as she once more looked at Zoro for guidance before back at Sanji and finally replying softly, "Conis. Are you a friend of Zoro's?"

"CONIS! What a gorgeous--"

"Unfortunately." Zoro answered her question as he cut the blond off, wanting to move this whole process along and get on with his day. From a few previous experiences hanging with the blond, he knew that once the blond got going on a woman he could croon for hours.

"Ouch." Sanji sent Zoro a sideways glance and a biting smile, "You are being ruthless today."

Zoro gave a lifted shoulder in a lame attempt at a shrug while letting a smirk touch his lips; it had become quite entertaining to him to see how much he could rile the blond up. He often found that saying nothing was also a really good way to drive the blond crazy.

"Is it because you're getting more comfortable around me?" Sanji questioned with mock seriousness, watching as Zoro plucked two leashes from behind the counter for them to use, "Do you feel like you can truly be your grumpy, angry self around me no-- oh wait... That's you every day."

Zoro turned to stare at the blond with a deadpanned expression.

"Don't you worry, Zoro!" Sanji exclaimed loudly, wrapping his arm around the man's broad shoulders and pulling him close. Simpering through fake sobs, "I'm always here if you need a shoulder to cry on."

"Don't touch me." Zoro grumbled dryly, unable to put any venom behind his words as Sanji released him with a guffaw and hard smack on the back. Wandering off to check out the centre as Zoro turned back to Conis who was watching them with a bright smile pursing her lips, "What?"
Her gaze wandered shyly for a moment before she responded with a cryptic giggle, "He's eccentric."

Groaning softly, Zoro muttered, "You have no idea--"

"OH." Sanji gasped dramatically, leaning back as he pointed an accusing finger at the wall before continuing while practically singing the final two words, "My. God."

Zoro's eyes slowly fell shut in horrified trepidation, knowing that anything that would make Sanji sound that menacingly gleeful could not be a good thing. Bracing himself, he slowly turned to see Sanji gesturing to a photo on the wall while grinning at Zoro almost manically, "Is this you?"

Without even nearing, Zoro knew exactly which photo was causing the blond such excitement, grudgingly admitting through tight lips, "Yes."

"Shit..." Sanji noted with a chuckle, plucking the photo from the wall to get a better look at it as he mused aloud, "There is... nothing threatening about you now."

Despite not wanting Conis to take that photo of him with the kittens, he hadn't really cared too much since he knew the odds of anyone seeing it were minimal. But it was just his luck that Sanji of all people would come with him and just happen to notice that photo of the hundreds on that damn bulletin board.

"Does the CIA know you're a kitten cuddler?" Sanji goaded through his laughter, waving the photo towards Zoro, "Cuz that is the cutest shit I've ever seen."

Zoro couldn't think of anything to say in response as his embarrassment was causing his throat to clamp shut, his shoulders raising as a flush began climbing up his neck. Cheeks starting to tinge pink as he couldn't quite figure out why the idea of Sanji seeing a vulnerable side of him made him feel so damn nervous. It might have been because he was so closed off most of his life due to his job, but he was certain that no one else would be able to get this reaction out of him with the same photo...

"Can I keep this?" Sanji implored to Conis, completely serious as the woman seemed to be actually debating it before Zoro finally recovered his confidence and stepped between them. Snatching the photo from the pesky blond's hand and returning it to the billboard and pinning it back in its original spot. Sanji huffing dramatically while muttering playfully out of the corner of his mouth to the other blonde, "Well, he's no fun."
"I think he's plenty fun." Conis replied timidly, offering Zoro a shy smile which Zoro returned gratefully. They may not have talked much, but the time he spent here together was far more important than words could say. She had given him a place to escape and begin healing, something which he'd never be able to thank her enough for.

Clearly sensing the joking was over, Sanji rolled his eyes and made his way back over to Zoro. Locking eyes with the other man before snatching up one of the leashes from his hands while chirping back at Conis, "I'll take your word on it, darling."

Blinking flatly for a few moments, he levelled Conis with an exhausted look which she only returned with a timid giggle that she hid behind her hand. Zoro shaking his head in resignation before following after Sanji into the kennels to select a couple dogs to take out for the day.

Guiding them down the aisle he gave Sanji a moment to look around before asking, "Who do you want to take out?"

"Are most of them friendly?" Sanji inquired, eyeing up an older dog that was firmly seated near the back of his kennel just watching them lazily.

"Yeah." Zoro nodded, "Everyone in these kennels is sociable. We have the one's we're still working with a little further down."

Sanji began perusing the aisle and looking in on each dog, noting the one's that had been marked as having already gone on a walk that day before coming to stop outside a smaller kennel. The dopey puppy bounded up to the front of the cage, paws clumsily reaching up to be placed on the chain link door and slipping through several times. Its motor controls still needing a little work as he finally managed to get balanced enough to remain on its hind legs while yipping happily up at Sanji.

"Oh shit." Sanji grinned as he dropped to a knee, hands reaching through the gate as best he could to pet the excitable puppy. Little teeth gnawing innocently on Sanji's thumb as he practically melted on the spot, "Damn, you're cute. What's his name?"

"Kuroashi." Zoro offered while watching the two blond's bonding, "Means 'black leg'."

At that Sanji tilted his head to get a better look at the puppy's hind legs, spotting the one black paw on his rear leg that was a stark contrast to the rest of his bright blond body. A distinctly high pitched sound came from Sanji before he looked up at Zoro in all seriousness and ordered, "This one."
"Okay." Zoro allowed through a laugh, not entirely sure if the blond realized that it wasn't up to him who Sanji was allowed to walk or not. Watching with a fond smile as Sanji undid the gate and slipped inside the tiny kennel to attempt to get the leash on the young pup.

Leaving Sanji to the playful wrestling match he'd undoubtedly have while trying to get the leash on the puppy, Zoro made his way over to a much quieter kennel. Dropping into a crouch by the more secluded cage, he gave a soft whistle and extended the back of his hand towards the cage and waited. After a moment, an older dog cautiously made his way forward upon recognizing Zoro, a weary gait telling of his age.

The old hound brightened considerably upon seeing Zoro, and by the time he had him out and on his leash Sanji was being dragged out by the puppy as well. Kuroashi was already running excited circles around Sanji's feet and getting them both tangled in this leash while Sanji attempted, "Who's that?"

"This is Yuba." Zoro explained, "Been here a while. He's probably not gonna ever get adopted because well..."

The unsaid sad truth hung between them for a moment before Sanji shrugged, "Why don't you take him home?"

"Ka--" Zoro cut himself off swiftly to keep from saying something he might regret, knowing the real reason he hadn't brought any of them home yet had nothing to do with him but rather the other person living with him. Attempting to lamely salvage it by muttering, "Can't."

Sanji seemed curious, but dropped it as he once more became distracted by Kuroashi who was nabbing one of his shoelaces and tugging on it like a toy. He fell to a knee to tie it once more while trying to battle the puppy off of him, eventually ending with double knotted laces and a face full of puppy slobber. Sanji didn't seem too upset.

Heading to the nearby park they took a slow walk around the lake; giving Yuba time to go at his own pace, and Kuroashi the opportunity to drag Sanji to every corner of the park to smell and curiously check out everything. A fond smile lighted up Zoro's face at how genuinely excited Sanji was about entertaining the puppy and coming along with Zoro; it was certainly something that Kalifa would never have done.

By the time they had finished the lap around the small park, Kuroashi was about as tired as Yuba
was; having to take three times as many steps as the bigger dog managed to tire him out substantially. Nearly half way back Sanji had stooped down to carry Kuroashi the rest of the way as the puppy was about ready to take a nap right there on the sidewalk. Zoro wasn't entirely an expert on cute, but he was pretty sure that the man cradling his likeness in dog form was up there with Zoro being accosted by kittens.

Back at the shelter, they finished putting the dogs back in their kennels - Sanji having a bit more of a tearful farewell - before they were heading back to Zoro's place. Sanji's phone going off midway through his declaration to return as often as possible to walk the pup until he finally got adopted.

"Luffy wants everyone to go out drinking tonight," Sanji explained, as he scanned the text he had received before pocketing his phone once more, "Wanted to know if you'd like to join us?"

"I'd like to..." Zoro began slowly.

"Hey..." Sanji consoled swiftly, tone immediately softening as he quickly amended, "I get it if you can't; loud noises and such. I can make up an excuse for the gang; Luffy just wanted me to ask."

"No... It's not that..." Zoro mused slowly, a little taken aback that Sanji had thought of potential triggers for him before even he had. Realizing it was a good point that he could potentially use before admitting, "I don't drink."

"Right." Sanji noted - almost guiltily - as it seemed he had likely noticed Zoro's preference of drink at the barbecue. Sanji falling silent as Zoro realized that he was being given the perfect out for this situation, and yet he found himself not wanting their time together to end just yet.

"I'll come."

"You sure?" Sanji asked, looking genuinely surprised.

"Yeah." Zoro confirmed much more firmly this time, "It would be nice to see everyone together again."

"Alright..." Though sounding initially timid, a smile was audibly growing on Sanji's face as he continued, "I'll let Luffy know; he'll be ecstatic."
At the second statement Zoro found his stomach dropping inexplicably, not entirely sure why it made him feel somewhat dejected. A witty statement asking if it was only Luffy looking forward to seeing him died on his lips as he knew Sanji would think the question is obviously ridiculous. Forcibly shaking off the weird emotions he turned his attention back to Sanji and their previous conversation.

~X~

Before even entering The Galley, Zoro had a suspicion that it would be a somewhat tough night to handle, however entering the place with Sanji had made it remarkably easier. He had regularly made it through nights at the bowling alley, still kept up his shooting practice with Sanji on weekends, and had even celebrated a few summer festivals that had involved copious amounts of fireworks. So as daunting as it was, he was fairly confident he would be able to keep his head.

Upon entering however, he realised all of his recent training hadn't entirely prepared him for the sudden onslaught of flashing lights, booming music, and copious screaming from the patrons. A bit of a daze taking over himself, he was beginning to worry that he might not be able to do this and it was a very bad idea. Panic started to rise before being immediately doused as he felt Sanji's hand enclose around his and begin pulling him further inside.

The reassuring hold was like a protective shield to all the noise and confusion around him until they eventually found their friends at a booth and the blond let go of Zoro's hand. Sanji releasing his grip still had him a bit on edge, but everyone's welcoming cheers and hugs were still a major comfort. Almost all his worries completely shoved aside as Luffy practically tackled him with a drunken hug.

Taking a seat at the thankfully rather secluded booth, he jammed himself into the corner beside Luffy and Usopp and clutched at his drink like it was the only thing keeping him planted on the earth at the moment. Calming his breathing through forceful exhales, as he turned to Usopp in an attempt to distract himself.

Conversation took place for a while with far too much yelling involved as everyone caught up on work and other things currently going on in their lives. Some rather political arguments were being held at one end of the table between Franky and a very sloshed Nami, and Usopp spent about fifteen minutes trying to show everyone photos of Pepper's school project that had won him an award.

Every once in a while Sanji sent Zoro a weary glance, which Zoro just returned with a tip of his drink and calm nod. This continued on for a while until Nami pulled a reluctant Vivi out onto the dance floor and others began to follow. Zoro having to latch onto the table and physically fight Luffy from dragging him out as well; being here was a big enough step, he didn't need to add the claustrophobia of grinding bodies into the mix as well.
After Sanji beat Luffy off of him and sent him off with a rather pointed look - that got a stuck out tongue in return- Sanji turned back to Zoro. Leaning in towards him, hair brushing against Zoro's cheek as he yelled into Zoro's ear so he could hear him, "You going to be okay?"

Zoro caught himself a little off guard by the closeness, the faint caress of Sanji's hair on his cheek causing him to jump momentarily and his senses catching the man's musk, that was normally masked by the odour of smoke that hung over him. Not entirely sure why he found the proximity so unnerving but not really having time to dwell on it as he replied, "Yeah."

When Sanji pulled away he was looking at Zoro imploringly as though still not entirely convinced so Zoro waved him off before pointing to his beverage and gave a reassuring nod. It seemed to placate Sanji enough as he gave a thumbs up before running onto the dance floor and proceeded to drunkenly make his way to some random girl.

From his place at the table, he was able to keep himself rather calm, gaze turning down to the non-alcoholic beer in his hands as he began scratching at the label with his thumb. Several months ago there would be no way he could even set foot in a building like this â€“ backfiring cars were enough to set him off â€“ and yet here he was. And he still wasn’t entirely sure what it was that had gotten him to progress this well so quickly...

A while passed as Zoro remained in the booth calmly sipping his drink and observing the chaotic nightlife within the bar. He was pulled from his thoughts when Sanji drunkenly stumbled over to the table, collapsing into the booth with a satisfied groan. Cheeks notably tinged pink, it seemed like the blond had definitely had his fair share of alcohol for the evening and was now cradling a fresh beer in his hand.

"Having fun?" Zoro asked.

"Always!" Sanji yelled with a grin, pounding back almost half his drink before slamming it down on the table and gesturing to himself. Probably intending to go for a regal look, but with his crooked collar, missing button, and the drink stain on his shirt it ruined the effect, "I'm the definition of fun."

"Is that why that girl ditched you?" Zoro pointed out flatly, taking a swig of his own drink but pointedly keeping his gaze pinned on the blond.

"Phft." Sanji scoffed indignantly, brushing off Zoro's teasing as easily as he normally did, only this time with a tad more slurring, "Please. I'm just getting a drink to give her a chance to recuperate; I'm
"You're a lot to handle. Period." Zoro noted shrewdly.

That managed to earn a hearty chuckle from the blond that lasted far longer than the joke warranted. Sanji eventually gained some composure as he leaned forward with a grin and muttered drunkenly, "So, got any cool CIA stories?"

Making a face, Zoro offered a half truth, "It's classified."

Nothing was necessarily classified; he could tell whomever he wanted. However, if someone ever found out that people besides him knew, they might end up on a hit list. There were a lot of closed cases he could probably regale Sanji with, but he honestly didn't want to relive that part of his life yet; he still had problems sharing it when his therapist forced it out of him.

"Boo." Sanji exclaimed with an exaggerated pout before conceding with a batted hand of surrender. There was a moment of silence after which he was insisting eagerly, "Okay. Okay. What about your childhood? That can't possibly be classified."

"It's... pretty dull." Zoro offered cautiously, more surprised than anything that Sanji would care about something so mundane. No one had ever cared or asked about his childhood before - aside from his therapist - however, it was mostly because there wasn't anything to tell. "Small town; joined the military to get out. That's it."

"Huh." Sanji hummed in a rather disappointed tone, chin falling into his palm as he continued to watch Zoro with a drunken, enigmatic stare, "I was expecting something far more exciting..."

"Sorry to disappoint." Zoro shrugged, inclining his drink towards the blond before rebuffing, "What about you?"

"Port town." Sanji offered between a sip of his beer, a fond, reminiscent smile lighting up his face, "A lot of days spent down at the docks; fishing and racing sailboats."

"Sounds nice." Zoro noted sincerely, "Why'd you leave?"
"School." A shrug, followed by another hearty swig of beer before Sanji continued, "Then got sent here; never left."

"Why?" Zoro found himself asking before realizing it. Not judging Sanji, nor anyone else for that matter for living in such a quaint little town, but also not entirely sure why someone would willingly choose it. Coming here certainly hadn't been of his own volition.

Sanji's face went soft, and without even glancing out towards the floor where he knew his companions were he tilted his head and murmured, "'Cause of them."

"They're that special?" Zoro inquired rhetorically, already knowing the answer. Having had it proven to him numerous times already in the past couple months.

"They're family." Sanji implored sincerely, face falling for a moment as he muttered, "They've helped me through a lot..."

A weird silence hung in the air that made Zoro feel like he was missing something from Sanji's earlier statement; not entirely sure what the blond could be implying, and also unsure if it was polite of him to ask. Instead, he just let the conversation die as Sanji began fidgeting with his beer uncomfortably before abruptly looking back up at Zoro.

"Look, I wasn't entirely honest..." Sanji began guiltily, Zoro looking at him in surprise as he clarified, "About knowing about your PTSD."

Zoro didn't respond, just raised a curious brow as he waited for the blond to continue.

"My dad did a tour; it messed him up pretty bad." Sanji admitted softly, cradling his beer in tense hands as it was clear that he wasn't reliving particularly fond memories, "He wasn't the same afterwards. And after my mom passed away, he got... well... I went to live with my uncle after that..."

Zoro sat quietly listening to Sanji's drunken, rambling confession; understanding a lot of what Sanji meant even though it mostly went unsaid. Knowing all too well that Zoro had had moments of weakness like that as well, only he was fortunate enough to have no one around him to suffer the consequences. Unsure of what to possibly say to console the blond he just remained sitting across from him with a silent, yet consoling look on his face.
Rubbing a hand across his face, Sanji shook himself before laughing, "Aw, man. Listen to me, making you listen to my shit... Anyway, what I meant was I knew what the signs look like cause of my dad; not my work."

"I... don't mind listening." Zoro managed honestly, knowing that if he didn't at least say something, the blond might think he was annoyed by his comments. Opting to take a page out of his therapists book, he added, "I'm glad you shared that with me."

A sputtering laugh broke the awkward tension that had built between them as Sanji began cackling before managing, "Jeez, what are you? My therapist?"

Smile quirking his lips at Sanji's words, Zoro offered instead, "I was thinking; friend?"

"Friend..." Sanji echoed the word in agreement, though through the loud music it almost sounded as though the blond was forlorn. Not given time to dwell on it however as Sanji raised his beer in a toast which Zoro accepted, before taking a long, and heavy chug. When they both lowered their bottles, Sanji remained smiling contentedly for a moment before the drunken haze in his eyes cleared momentarily.

"Hey..." Sanji noted with a hint of recognition in his voice as he leaned forward with narrowed eyes, "Isn't that...?"

Zoro cast a short glance behind himself and noted without much surprise his wife at the bar chatting with a stranger far too amiably. Her hand coming up to gently caress his chest as she laughed at something he said, her body swaying closer to his in interest as she tossed her hypnotizing hair over her shoulder flirtatiously. A long leg wrapped in fishnets inched closer to rub against the other man's leg as Zoro finally had enough and turned his back, not needing to see any more nor subject himself to the harsh reality.

"Shouldn't we..." Sanji began before a perplexed expression started to form on his face as he was clearly beginning to see what Zoro had already and was beginning to put the pieces together. Though he was still very obviously not entirely believing what he saw as his flicked back to Zoro in concern.

"No." Zoro cut the man off swiftly, keeping his gaze fixed firmly ahead of himself as he gifted Sanji with a pointed look, praying for the man to not pry.
"I..." Sanji started, still not quite getting it before his eyes properly widened in surprise as the whole situation must have finally clicked in his head. Jaw hanging open, speechlessly darting his eyes back and forth between Zoro and Kalifa as he was still very much at a loss for words.

Not wanting to get into any of it with the other man - least of all while he was intoxicated - Zoro pushed himself up and glanced down at the blond sternly, "I'm leaving; do you need a ride?"

Sanji just nodded his head dumbly, still too flummoxed to comment as he followed Zoro out of the bar and made an effort to not be noticed by his wife. Keeping his head down and turned away, they eventually made it out and over to Zoro's truck, both of them climbing in as Zoro reversed out the parking lot a tad too aggressively.

Out on the late night streets, there was hardly any traffic as Zoro drove the memorized route back to Sanji's apartment - oddly finding a few dead ends along the way that were new. Sanji refraining from making a scathing comment about his lack of direction - actually not making comments of any kind as he still seemed in shock over what had just happened. They were only a couple blocks away when Sanji finally decided to pipe up.

"Hey, um..." Sanji began softly, an embarrassed flush creeping up his neck as his hand came up to run through his drunkenly tousled hair nervously, "I know it's none of my business..."

"Then don't say it." Zoro finished for the other man, knowing that there were undoubtedly countless things that he wanted to say and none of them were anything Zoro wanted to hear. Least of all would they change the situation that he had come to find himself in with his adulterous wife.

Sanji took the cue and remained silent for the rest of the drive, Zoro pulling up into front of the apartment complex and keeping his gaze fixated firmly ahead of himself as he listened to Sanji get out. Door hanging open long enough for him to know Sanji was probably looking at him with a mixture of pity and concern; neither of which he wanted to see on the blond's face.

"You deserve better than her." Was all that was muttered softly from the other man, before the door closed and Zoro could distantly hear the other man walking away. Sitting alone in his idling truck as the passenger light eventually turned off and doused him in darkness.

Hands tightening on the steering wheel, Zoro let his head duck forward as the painful writhing emotions that had been eating away at him came forth with a vengeance. All his internalized guilt and anger over what he had done in his life laid bare as he couldn't find a single excuse for why he should be treated any better, isolation reminding him of the death, pain, and humiliation he had caused so many people as he muttered, "I really don't."
TBC...
Realizations and Resolutions

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
A couple hopeless months adrift had found Zoro in a small pub on the coast of Croatia; trying to find any semblance of meaning to his life beyond his former career. Zoro cradled his drink solemnly in the corner as the agents words continued to run through his mind as he tried desperately to understand what he was expected to do with his life now.

Work had been his home. He had nowhere to go, no one waiting for him; he could disappear right now and no one would ever miss him. The past ten years of his life in espionage had been his obsession and now he was expected to simply let it go and begin anew...

So he found himself wandering in a desperate attempt to find something to keep him grounded once more, maybe somewhere he could stop and live out the rest of his miserable days. Weeks spent hiking the mountains in Laos, a few months living in a cabin in north-east Russia, several days on a beach in South Africa, and countless other places. None of them speaking to him in anyway, and all of it unable to break through the daunting, numb sensation that had taken over his mind the moment he had been discharged.

Now here he sat, attempting to drown himself in liquor – such as he had been trying to due for the past several months – in hopes that it might fix whatever felt so broken in him. Raising the glass to his lips he took a large swig before setting it back down and staring at the amber dregs hopelessly.

There was a loud crash accompanied by the shattering of glass as the entire room froze to glance over at the bar where an impeccably dressed woman stood. A long stiletto heel pressing into the windpipe of the man that was currently on the floor cradling what had to be broken nose as she flipped her elegant hair over her shoulder with a huff and exclaimed haughtily down to him, “That’s sexual harassment.”

The man whimpered pitifully as she finally pulled her heel away and turned back to the bar, downing the last of her martini before pulling on a pair of black leather gloves and snatching up a large case from by her stool. She strode out of the establishment with a confident sway that had many a man jumping out of her way as Zoro watched her leave; eyes falling to the case in interest as there seemed to be much more to her than met the eye.

‘Find yourself a girl…’

She was a girl...

Downing the last of his drink, he slapped a bill on the table and followed after her with purpose, determined to find out exactly who she was and why she quite obviously had a sniper rifle in her possession.

~X~

With the last few precise cuts from Chopper, the halves of the cast fell away to reveal Zoro’s bare arm for the first time in weeks. The skin was a tad paler than the rest, and even with his continued activity, the muscles had atrophied enough that there was a notable difference between his left and right forearm; there would be a couple months of therapy needed to compensate for that.

Zoro waited patiently until Chopper began prodding his arm to inspect the progress and see how well the bone had managed to heal. Remarkably small, yet sturdy hands held Zoro's wrist firmly, rotating it and testing its mobility, before moving on to do the same with his elbow.

A few more minutes of humming and hawing – the doctor was being far too critical in Zoro's opinion – Chopper finally pulled away with a pleased smile. He nabbed a clipboard from off his desk
and began to fill out the few forms he had as he chirped happily, “Bet it's nice to finally have that off, huh?”

“Yeah.” Zoro agreed fondly.

Zoro decided against telling Chopper that quite often when he had broken bones, he would just remove the cast himself when it had begun to itch and let the rest sort itself out. The only reason he had kept the cast on for the full amount of time was mainly for Chopper's mental well being and because he had a suspicion Sanji would attempt to break it again for being so negligent.

“It appears to have healed better than we could have hoped.” Chopper's final note finished with a scribbled flourish before he was looking back up at Zoro, “but I'll still double check the x-rays once they are available. Otherwise, you are free to go!”

“Great.” Zoro grunted happily, pushing himself off the examiner's table with much relief. As much as he enjoyed Chopper's company, he did not fancy spending any more time in hospitals than he absolutely had too. While they were different from the one's in the military, there was still an aura about them that put him on edge.

“Be careful with it.” Chopper admonished as an afterthought, clearly having been around Zoro long enough now to know that he wasn't the most careful with his injuries, “Don't go thinking you can go bench press a bunch of weight right away; you need to do some proper physio so you don't cause any lasting damage.”

“I won't.” Zoro consoled the younger man with a soft smile, not entirely telling him the truth but not wanting to worry him, “I know how to recover from my injuries.”

“I'll know if you do something to it!” Chopper warned as Zoro began backing out of the office, a little surprised that the small man nearly half his height actually had him feeling a little nervous, “I can tell!”

“Bye, Chopper!” Zoro shouted through a grin, closing the door on the still talking doctor as he heard a squawk of indignation he could hear just beyond it. A smile touching his lips as he turned to leave and heard inaudible, worried grumbling from the other side.

~X~

Steering his truck off the highway, Zoro followed a dirt road for a while until he arrived at a rather crowded gravel parking lot hidden in the trees just off the edge of the lake. Pines and shrubbery overgrowing much of the area, only barely held at bay by the constant occupants that came to use the area. Pulling into a free spot, he cut the engine and climbed out, slowly trudging across the lot as he took in the view.

There was a therapeutic beauty to the lakeside that had his breath coming in short. An unwarranted melancholy swelled within him as he stared out at the crystalline waters that stretched for miles within the peaceful valley. Mountains rose out like elegant pillars to surround the small haven, sun peeked through to reflect off of timid waves, and birds sung out in the still afternoon air.

Time itself felt like it stood still as he simply existed within this moment, not entirely sure why it affected him so or why it felt so undeserved. After years of death and war, something as innocently beautiful as this felt like a slave to his wounded soul. It was strange, but after all this time resenting where he had ended up after his mind deserted him, it felt like he was finally healing.

“Zoro!”
The sound of his name had him turning to look for its caller, the breath that had been caught in his throat releasing as his gaze landed on his friends. Final ache in his chest fading at the sight of Luffy standing beside his beat up truck waving enthusiastically, Sanji pausing from unloading the gear in the bed to grin at him too. All the others exiting their own vehicles as a smile lit up Zoro's face and he made his way over.

“You came!” Luffy shouted eagerly, tackling Zoro with an impressive amount of force for such a lanky boy, “Are you ready to get your butt beat at volleyball?!”

“Fat chance.” Zoro smirked, managing to wrestle him into a headlock and tousling the smaller man's hair. Trying to force his distracted mind to engage the conversation and the others around him, even though a part of him still felt like it was staring longingly at the lake, waiting for something that he didn't even know.

Luffy put up a terrifyingly good fight to get out of the hold and was attempting to return the favour to Zoro when he got distracted by Chopper running off towards the lake. Eyes widening, he began untangling himself from the scuffle, bellowing far too close to Zoro's ear as he took off after the young doctor, “Wait for me!”

“Ah!” Zoro grunted irritably, putting a finger to his ear and trying to rub the ringing out that the boy had caused; somehow his yelling was sharper than gunfire. Shaking it off, he walked over to the truck Sanji was still standing in the back of attempting to unload.

Chuckling at what had just occurred, Sanji noted, “Got here alright, I see.”

“Before you did.” Zoro snorted.

“Dumb luck.” Sanji groused back as he finished dragging the cooler and some other gear towards the tailgate before straightening and taking in the view from where he stood in the back of the truck as he heaved a contented sigh, “What a gorgeous day.”

Zoro shrugged in mute agreement, mouth opening to give a half-hearted response when Sanji moved to take off his shirt and Zoro found his words trailing off lamely. The shirt was removed in a swift motion, but from where Zoro was standing, it felt like the moment dragged out for an eternity.

Fingers curling in the hem of the soft blue cotton, dragged slowly upwards to reveal his toned midriff in a languished motion; body flexing as he pulled the shirt over his head with a final jerk to reveal his lean torso. Discarding his shirt on the roof of the truck, his hands returned to his hips as he boasted, “Time to make it even more gorgeous.”

Zoro had never seen Sanji out of the stuffy shirts or work clothes, and he found himself a little shocked that the blond was actually in very healthy shape. As Sanji finished removing the shirt Zoro felt an unfamiliar lurch in his gut and nearly jumped when a voice spoke up next to him.

“Need any help, Sanji?” Vivi asked as both girls returned from changing into their swimwear, breaking the silence that had been stretching between them as Zoro pointedly looked elsewhere. He had spent a decade around men in the army and never once had he been flustered by someone's nudity before; what the hell was wrong with him?

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Sanji implored soothingly, dropping out of the back of the truck with a lazy hop and leaning an elbow on the truck as he jerked his thumb towards Zoro, “I got this muscle head to help haul everything; you girls just go find a good spot to relax.”

“If you're sure.” Vivi mumbled warily, still sounding unconvinced.
“He's sure.” Nami reassured firmly, snagging up Vivi's hand in hers and guiding her off towards the beach with a teasing wink, “C'mon you can help me put on some sunscreen~”

Watching the couple go, he frowned minutely as he wondered why their state of undress hadn't bothered him nearly as much as Sanji's had. He was unable to really contemplate the thought as Sanji began pulling a large cooler from the back of the truck and was shoving it in Zoro's direction.

“Could you take this?” Sanji asked, not waiting for a response before handing it over into Zoro's extended arms, “Make sure Luffy doesn't get into it!”

“Uh... Sure.” Zoro mumbled as he turned to make his way down the trail towards the lake, still a little flustered over the confusing situation that had just happened as he made his way out onto the sand and as predicted Luffy made a concerted effort to get inside the cooler.

Zoro fought to keep him at bay, and it ended with the cooler wedged in the sand with Zoro sitting firmly on top of it while keeping Luffy at length with a foot to the face. The dispute only came to an end when he was distracted by Sanji's arrival and the bag containing the volleyball net that was tossed in his direction.

The net was quickly set up in the sand and the teams were divided fairly equal, Sanji promising to beat Zoro thoroughly as he took the other team. Franky, Vivi, Luffy, Kaya, and Sanji began figuring out their positions as Nami and Zoro went to the other side with Chopper, Usopp, and the three hellions. Nami immediately handed the ball to Zoro and began ordering him to take the serving position with far more authority than Zoro felt she deserved, but also didn't feel in the mood about saying anything over.

“Now, Zoro...” Chopper began wearily as he took a place on the court beside Zoro, “Don't be too aggressive on your arm. I don't want--”

“Don't worry, Chopper.” Zoro reassured sincerely, raising the ball in his left hand and grinning down at the smaller boy, “My arm's just fine; see?”

Tossing it up into the air, he brought his right hand over and smacked it as hard as he could to send it whistling over the net to the other side, ball pegging Sanji directly in the back of the head and sending the blond in a fiery tirade as Zoro turned back to Chopper and held up his arm confidently, “Totally healed.”

Chopper was too busy watching nervously as Sanji came darting across the beach at the two of them, ball held menacingly in his hand as he hucked it back at Zoro when in range. The ball completely missed Zoro before he had an armful of blond tackling him backwards into the lake as Sanji made his best attempt to drown him. Zoro returned the favour while pointedly trying not to remember the numerous other times he had held others underwater for much less playful reasons.

“Boys!” Both of them froze to look up at Nami whom was standing with the volleyball poised on her hip impatiently as she continued, “You done? We'd like to play.”

“Of course, Nami! Darling!” Sanji crooned as he abruptly released Zoro and gave cheery wave, turning back to Zoro and muttering through a grin, “This ain't over.”

Before Zoro had a chance to respond Sanji was slapping a handful of water into his face and running out of the lake and up the beach to join everyone on the court. Zoro attempted to follow as he sputtered water out of his eyes and mouth from Sanji's cheap shot; though he found it was only fair since he did peg the man in the back of the head with the ball.
The next few hours passed without incident as they played several games with people coming and going as they chose to either take a dip in the lake or relax in the sand for a while. Most of the adults getting tuckered out until Zoro too was ready to quit and take a nap in the hot sun for a few hours.

His intentions were rudely interrupted when he nearly got taken down by a small youth jumping up and latching onto his back with a death grip as two others assaulted him from the front. Fighting to get the children off of him for several moments, he eventually gave in and nabbed the other two under his arms and stomped off into the lake.

Horrified shrieking and laughter echoed across the valley causing several other people, who had come to relax at the lake as well, looking over in concern, finding a man dragging the three kids into the cold lake water as they laughed while trying to get away.

Dunking the two he had under his arms, he reached over to try and grab the third menace that still had him in a choke hold. Finally managing to get a proper hold of Piiman, he hefted the kid above his head before tossing him as far as he could towards the deeper part of the lake, a large splash drenching them as he immediately tried to run away from the other two that were still latched onto him like leeches.

“Do me! Do me!” Luffy screamed while running into the lake after them, “Me next!”

Zoro soon found himself with an armful of Luffy, the man smashing his cheek against Zoro’s in a painfully tight hug, and realized far too late that he had now condemned himself to the role of the fun adult. Shrugging uselessly, he turned back and waded a little deeper into the water before hefting Luffy up.

Throwing Luffy as best as he could - considering he was a fully grown adult - he managed to launch Luffy a good couple feet towards the drop off where the lake got considerably deeper. He fell in with an excited yell and a large splash.

All three of the Usopp’s boys stopped in their tracks and gazed at the spot for a few moments before bubbles and thrashing began to break the surface.

“Uh, Luffy can't swim.” Tamanegi noted flatly to Zoro, still staring at the spot where Luffy had gone under as Zoro rounded on the child with wide eyes.

“What?!”

Not even waiting for a response, he waded through the waist deep water as fast as he could until he felt the drop off and he dove in after Luffy. He grabbed the flailing boy around the waist and hauled him back to shallower waters, the brunette attempting to drag him under while gasping and sputtering. Arms hooked under Luffy’s armpits as he dragged him closer to shore before dropping him and collapsing on the sand beside him.

Both of them gasped for breath as Zoro initially planned to round on the boy and ask what the hell he had been thinking, but was interrupted by Luffy breaking out in hysterical laughter. Zoro was only able to roll his eyes and chuckle as well; he could hardly fathom why Luffy would do something so suicidal on purpose.

“My turn.”

Zoro looked up to see the Ninjin staring down his nose at him expectantly. A weary smile cracked across Zoro’s face as he pushed himself up and muttered, “Yeah, alright.”

~X~
“Okay, that's enough for me.” Zoro finally conceded as he attempted to drag himself from the lake
with the three children still clinging onto him. He’d spent the last hour flinging the kids as far as he
could into the lake and in return have them attempt to drown him in their excitement.

“But Uncle Zoro!”

“Uncle Zoro needs a break.” Usopp admonished to a chorus of lamenting groans. Zoro sent the man
a relieved look as he dragged himself the rest of the way out of the lake as the father tried to pacify
the boys, “Come sit with me and your mother, get something to eat; then I'll come out with you.
Sound good?”

There were mixed reviews to Usopp's plan but it allowed Zoro to finally get out of the water and up
the beach to grab something to drink. Downing nearly the whole bottle in a couple large gulps before
glancing around to see what everyone else had gotten up to.

Everyone lounging in the sun and enjoying their day off; Luffy the exception with a still
insurmountable amount of energy as he seemed to be attempting to dig a massive hole in the sand.
Usopp's boys also finally took a seat and enjoyed some watermelon out of the cooler Sanji had
provided.

Speaking of the blond... it had been quite some time since he had been called a name, or had
someone attempt to drown him other than a few children. His gaze slowly scanned the beach in
confused disappointment as no bright, blond hair came into sight.

“He's at the docks.” Nami murmured from near Zoro's feet. Not even bothering to open her eyes
from where she lay on her towel while soaking in the sun.

“Huh?” Zoro grunted in confusion.

“Sanji.” She muttered a bit more pointedly, even sounding a little bit exasperated.

Zoro turned his gaze down the beach, spotting a rickety dock sticking out into the water with a few
of the locals boats tethered to it. An instantly recognizable splash of blond hair was visible near the
end as Zoro turned his gaze back to the redhead who still remained with her eyes closed.

A question was poised on his lips, curious as to why she would even think he would care where the
blond was, but he held his tongue, not sure if it was because he knew the answer, or because there
was perhaps something she might say that he wasn't entirely certain he wanted to hear. Either way,
he shut his jaw before turning and making his way down the beach to go see what the other man was
up to.

Making his way down the dock, he noticed it was already remarkably more isolated from the ruckus
of the public beach, with only the distant screams of children to be heard. He finally reaching the end
where Sanji sat with his feet dangling off the edge, fishing rod held in a lax hand as his other held his
cigarette.

Upon Zoro's approach Sanji looked up with a knowing chuckle, “Need a break?”

Zoro shrugged innocently, as he wasn't sure how to admit that it had more to do with Sanji's missing
presence than anything else. Carefully dropping down to take a seat beside the blond he simply
shrugged and began to relax in the comfortable silence he was always able to enjoy when in the
men's presence.

Sanji sensed this – as perceptive as ever – and kept quiet as he continued fishing while the two of
them sat in the late afternoon sun. Zoro watched as Sanji managed to reel in another fish to join the
several already in the container he had brought with him before casting the line out once more.

Zoro finally broke the silence as he noted the number of fish Sanji had already collected and asked, “How many you planning to catch?”

“Probably one more and then clean ’em up.” Sanji replied, before glancing over at Zoro and asking curiously, “Ever gut a fish?”

Zoro shook his head.

“I can show you later if you want?” Sanji suggested while plucking the cigarette from his lips, fingers pressing into his lips as he lazily blew a stream of smoke between them, smirk hidden by the palm of his hand as his eyes remained pinned to Zoro expectantly.

“It's alright.” Zoro uttered shortly, gaze darting away as he couldn't help but feel overwhelmed by the intense nature of the blond's stare at the moment. Instead, he watched the sloping curve of the fishing line that draped from Sanji's fishing rod into the water below.

Ripples curled out from around the thin string as Sanji began reeling it in a little more before a bit of tension caused the line to snap taut and the rod to bend. For the next couple minutes, Sanji carefully struggled with the catch before eventually getting it free. With a dramatic splash, the hook came jerking out the water with a large clump of lake vegetation clinging to the end.

“Oh, look!” Sanji chirped excitedly, “Your cousin!”

Zoro scowled indignantly at the comment, watching as the line swung in and Sanji was able to nab it and begin wrestling the bit of algae off the hook. Without a word he tossed it in Zoro's direction, giving the man no other option but to catch it in his hands and make a face at the slimy sensation.

“Gross.” Zoro grumbled as Sanji snickered, “Damn, Curly.”

Baiting the hook once more, Sanji cast the line out again and let it sit lazily in the water as he started up a fresh cigarette while still grinning to himself. And as Zoro sat with the wet piece of algae in his hands, gazing over at the blond, something dramatic shifted in that quaint, simple moment.

Sanji sat beside him with his curly mess of sandy blond hair illuminated by the afternoon sun shining just beyond, a golden hue dancing across the locks. Face ducked down with a cigarette poised between soft lips, one hand shading the tip as the other flicked his lighter into life. Rod balanced in the crook of his elbow as he took a long drag on the smoke until the end crackled into life.

Pulling away suddenly, Sanji pocketed his lighter and shifted the fishing rod back into his hand as he removed the cigarette from between his lips and released a long stream of smoke. The cloud danced out across the water of the lake as Zoro continued to watch the man before him with a new found sense of understanding; the emotion that had steadily been growing in his chest finally recognizable.

Zoro sat in misplaced awe at the sudden realization of what he had come to, and utterly taken aback by the visage of the man before him. A sincere desire for the other man that both exhilarated and terrified him as it was something he had never recalled feeling for someone so desperately before; let alone for a man.

It didn't make any sense.

This feeling that had steadily been growing inside of him for months now had morphed into a single inescapable conclusion that had Zoro void of any reaction in its wake. Jaw barely kept from falling open as the once surge of happiness that would swell in his chest upon seeing the blond had now
turned into something far more intimate; a sensation he hadn't ever really felt before when looking at someone else.

Yet, despite how foreign the feeling, it was easy for him to place exactly what it was and how overwhelming it was to experience.

Zoro must have been quiet for far too long, because Sanji turned to look at Zoro, shifting the rod into his left hand so he could remove the cigarette with his right and asked around a small chuckle, “What?”

Zoro forced himself to quit staring, the realization that he had just come to still in the process of rocking him to his very core and shattering the foundations of everything he had thought he had known about himself. Choking back sudden, painful emotions that were fighting to free themselves, he just shook his head and murmured back softly, “Nothing.”

Turning his anxious gaze back out to the beach, distantly watching the antics of the many people playing in the water and the few that he recognized. Trying to keep his posture aloof all the while, his mind was crumbling in on itself under the weight of the simple fact that he had developed feelings for the oblivious man sitting beside him. “Nothing at all…”

~X~

Clock ticking loudly in the silent office, Zoro sat stiffly in the padded leather chair with his gaze pinned to the floor as his thoughts raced. Fingers turning the wedding ring on his finger nervously, thoughts that he hadn't really allowed himself to dwell on were coming to the surface for the first time in weeks. Sexual confusion, adulterous desires, emotional turmoil; all of it caused by one solitary man.

“Zoro…” Robin began softly, Zoro's gaze snapping up sharply to meet hers as she continued delicately, “If you wish to remain silent for our full hour together; that is your choice. However, I can't help but feel something is on your mind.”

His gaze dropped back to the floor heavily, continuing to turn the band on his finger methodically as though reminding himself of its presence was the only thing keeping him grounded at the moment, knowing full well that nearly forty minutes had passed and he has been mulling over the same conflicting thoughts, unable to find the confidence to voice them, nor find a solution to them.

“What…” Zoro eventually began, the quiet word the first he had managed to speak in the entire time he had been in the office. Sitting still for several more minutes, he urged himself to continue, “What does someone do when they develop feelings for someone other than their partner?”

It was clearly not the question Robin had been expecting, but she certainly didn't look surprised by it as she reevaluated Zoro calmly. Carefully considering all the aspects of his question and no doubt making assumptions about its occurrence before finally replying cryptically, “That depends.”

“On what?”

“On what you want to hear.” Robin replied coolly.

“What's that supposed to mean?” Zoro snapped back, not in the mood for her games at the moment.

“Are you sure you want to discuss this with me?” Robin asked carefully, knowing full well that the last time she had broached the rather delicate subject of Zoro's relationship with his wife, it had not ending pleasantly. “Because you may not like to hear what I have to say.”
Zoro remained stubbornly silent for a long time, knowing everything the woman had just said was completely true. It had been a long standing truce between them that she wouldn't bring up his wife and the tenuous situation that was going on between them, and he wouldn't wreck any of her office furniture. However, now it seemed that the situation was different, considering entirely foreign emotions were now in play.

“I do.” He managed softly. Before he had known exactly how he wanted to maintain his relationship with his wife, but that was back when there were no other emotions within him. This entire situation was foreign to him and he honestly had no idea where to even begin.

“Alright, Zoro.” Robin stated simply, closing the file that had been sitting open in her lap with finality and leaning forward, “I'll be blunt; your relationship is toxic.”

Zoro refrained from flinching. He had known her opinion was going to be harsh, and he was also aware that Robin likely had a very sour interpretation of how Kalifa had been treating Zoro.

“The very fact that you refuse to speak to me about it is the first sign that something isn't quite right between you two,” Robin continued sternly, “And while I have done all in my power to help you these past two years I have found that she has been a major roadblock in your recovery.

“If I weren't your therapist I would tell you that I trust this new person far more than I do your current wife, based mainly on the fact that you have made more progress in the last few months with them then you have in three years with her.” Robin state coolly, “But I am your therapist, so I will leave you with this; this is your life, you choose how you want to live it.”

Zoro remained calm in the wake of Robin's brutal honesty, knowing almost everything she had said had rung with painful truth. However, he found himself hesitant to believe the solution was as easy as she was making it seem. As though one single person was the problem and another was the solution.

Despite these raging emotions that still felt as though they threatened to tear themselves from his chest, he knew they were illogical. How could he possibly leave his wife of several years simply because he happened to develop some feelings for someone else, especially a man. Was he supposed to give up everything good in his life on the off chance that Sanji felt something for him as well? Was he willing to risk losing the best friend he had possibly ever had in his life as well as everyone else associated with Sanji just because of a few stupid feelings?

No.

“Thank you.” He managed sincerely, despite the tightness of his jaw and the ache from having teeth clenched together for so long, pushing himself from the chair with calm finality as he knew exactly what he had to do. Despite the conflict roiling within him, he knew that it was a pointless. Whatever these fleeting emotions made him feel, it wasn't enough to justify losing everything he had managed to accomplish in these last couple months.

Striding from the office resolutely, he left any and all of his wavering thoughts behind in that room. Deciding firmly to ignore the emotions, best to let them wither and die than to mess up the small iota of happiness he had finally managed to build for himself.

TBC...
Odd side note, but obviously /actually/ jumping in to save someone who is drowning is a SUPER dangerous idea. So I'm just putting it out there that I do not condone the method of jumping into the water to save someone who is drowning (even though that is the main method used in One Piece lol).

Anyway, hope you enjoyed the chapter! And thank you all for your kind comments and reviews; they mean the world to me!

See you next Monday :D

PS Yes, Nami and Vivi are together... for those that were curious.
Revelations

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
Everything continued on as normal despite the fact that, to Zoro, the entire world had shifted. It was difficult for the first week as the sight of Sanji had him extraordinarily flustered for reasons he couldn't quite fathom. Knees feeling weak even while being seated, and the happiness curling in his chest had twisted into a longing ache that ebbed depending on his proximity to the man.

By the second week he had started to handle it better, so that Sanji would not find anything suspicious. Although, when they went shooting one afternoon, Zoro had found himself distracted by the dorky blond's teasing and he had missed the target entirely; much to Sanji's bewilderment.

After a month, things were beginning to resemble normalcy. He was able to hold a conversation with Sanji once more without begin drawn in by his eyes and missing a statement. And he was able to be alone with him without breaking into a cold sweat at the notion that he wanted the man physically,
while also having zero idea of what that even entailed.

A constant war waged within him as he tried to keep these newly discovered emotions in check; finding it very hard to keep his heart from skipping a beat at the mention of Sanji’s name, and scowling to himself every time he found his breath catching when Sanji’s gaze landed on him. He knew that the right thing to do was to forget any and all feelings he was harbouring for the man. However, it was far more difficult to dismiss such pervasive emotions than he had initially thought it would be.

But he was used to slow progress.

Early summer light filtered through the shuttered window to fall across Zoro’s face, his gaze pinned to the ceiling as he waited for the alarm. He had returned to his fitful sleep pattern thanks to the new stress that was hounding his every waking moment.

On cue the alarm beeped to announce the start of a new day, Zoro reaching out to smack the top to cut it short as Kalifa stirred next to him. She rolled towards him with a gorgeous smile on her sleepy face, a hand placing itself on his chest as she curled up to his side; her intentions quite obvious as Zoro turned away in culpable disinterest.

The relationship he had begun to mend with his wife had fallen once more into disrepair when he realized, with disgust, that he had only been using her for some selfish unrequited desire that he had no right to have. Even if she didn’t know, it wasn’t right to continue anything with her when his thoughts lingered elsewhere.

Looking back her way and pressing an apologetic kiss to her forehead, he climbed out of bed and got dressed for his morning workout, sensing her confused stare following him as he began to leave the room. He paused for a moment at the doorway before realizing there was nothing he could possibly say to explain his behaviour, and silently made his way out.

Scowling his way through most of his workout, he tried to release some of his sexual frustration out with heavy iron and stiff kevlar, making marginal progress as he heard Kalifa leave for the day, and he followed soon after. Heading out on his morning run – the blond absent – Zoro took off down the street with the usual cadence. Same old path, same old steps he had tracked, only, this time with a far more intimate and unexplored emotion shadowing his every thought.

Trying to keep his train of thought focused solely on himself he started his daily jog by paying close attention to the feeling of the pads of his fingertips as he rounded a street corner and passed a silver truck headed in the opposite direction.

It had been a long time since he had had a relapse. However, due to his recent revelation, he didn't want to risk his distracted mental state letting him have an episode. Especially since he didn't have Sanji accompanying him today. It was imperative he kept himself focused.

And so he attempted to keep himself distracted from both his thoughts - of Sanji as well as his more haunted memories. Around the neighbourhood and through the park, around the lake and back around. Slowing his jog into a few halting steps, he eventually came to a stop as he glanced over his shoulder through panting breaths while frowning shortly.

Something was off.

It wasn't something he could explain, but after spending his whole life in the military he had a sixth sense when it came to certain situations. His senses picked up on things that his brain had yet to process, but it still made him aware of the situation with a nagging feeling in his gut. He stared back
at the trail, at the path where the elderly couple would always be walking when Sanji and he were on their morning run.

They were gone.

Suddenly, an image of the silver truck from the accident flashed through his mind, and he realized, with awe at his own stupidity, that it had been the same vehicle he had run by that morning while being so self involved. And it had been heading back down the street for...

Zoro's eyes widened in horror as he turned on his heels and bolted back through the park as fast as his feet could possibly carry him. Lungs burning and muscles aching, he realized with furious self-hatred that the elderly couple had been there at the time of the accident but he hadn't thought anything of it.

There was no way that could've all been a coincidence?! Could it?!

Rounding the corner onto his street, his momentum carried him off the sidewalk and into the road as he bolted the last bit down the middle before sprinting up the driveway and coming bursting into the house. Door slamming into the wall as he skidded to halt and strained his ears against the pounding of his heart and his wheezing gasps.

After several silent seconds it became quite obvious that the house was empty, however something still didn't feel right. Slowly treading through each room to confirm no one was hiding, he then located his phone in the bedroom and called Kalifa, carefully making his way back downstairs as it rang. There was a single ring before she answered with a calm greeting.

“Kalifa?” Zoro demanded as steadily as he could manage, relieved that she had at least picked up the phone which meant she couldn't be in any immediate danger. He wiped a hand across his forehead to try and sop up some of the sweat dripping into his eyes, still panting heavily from his run back.

“What is it?” She replied, concern lacing her words as she could clearly hear the tension in his own.

“Are you alright?”

“I just...” Zoro started, unable to properly explain the gut feeling he was getting. But, they had both been in the same line of work, so she would surely understand what he meant when he continued, “Something's wrong...”

Trying to understand what was going on and why he had such an uneasy feeling that refused to abate. His mind started to wander as he mulled over the situation, ignoring Kalifa’s worried responses as his gaze fell out of focus. It didn't make any sense.

A silver truck. And an old couple.

Zoro had been in the game long enough to recognize surveillance when he saw it; although he was somewhat peeved at himself for not realizing it sooner. In retrospect, the couple's presence now seemed obvious, and the driver was even more so. However, if they were all hired surveillance; did that mean there were others he had yet to notice?

A million questions whirled around Zoro's head as he began to logically break down the situation in an attempt to try and figure out who these people could possibly be and what they wanted; desperately trying to remember if the faces were familiar from his previous life, or if the M.O. was indicative of an old enemy. Question after question, scenario after possible scenario played out in his head as he couldn't figure out what they wanted.

Why were they staking him out for so long? Why the car accident? And why such an obvious drive-
by to grab his attention today? If he was correct in his assumption that the missing couple and the truck were meant to tip him off, then why did the man drive by his house but not come in? If they were here for him then why hadn't they come after him directly yet?

What else would they be after...?

Eyes widening in horror, he realized that if they had been spying on him for the past couple months then they would've seen everything. All the time spent together; their morning runs, afternoons shooting, each time they had been near the other. Any intelligent operative would have eventually come to the conclusion what Zoro himself had been fighting against.

“I'll call you back.” Zoro murmured hollowly into the phone, cutting the call with his wife before he dialed Sanji's number and held the phone to his ear as he began pacing through his house in agitation. He made for the basement, descending the stairs as it rung once, twice, then three times, his heart thundering in fear.

On the fourth ring he muffled his gasp of relief when Sanji finally answered and his soothing, reassuring baritone met Zoro’s ears.

“Hey, whatcha need?”

“Where are you?” Zoro asked immediately, knowing that the question was demanding but if his suspicions were at all correct then he didn't have time to mess around with politeness. Holding the phone in a rigid grip, he was beginning to wonder if perhaps he was just being paranoid; looking for danger when there was none.

It wouldn't be the first time...

“Uhm...” Sanji hummed before chuckling, “Home, why?”

“Alone?” Zoro barked, instantly realizing how weird the question must have sounded as he was really beginning to doubt himself, his pacing slowing to a stop. From Sanji's perspective, Zoro must have seemed almost insane; calling and demanding to know where he was.

“Yeah.” Sanji snorted, his tone becoming a little more weary, “What's up? Why are you so out of breath?”

“I just--” Zoro began hopelessly, not even sure how to possibly begin to explain the situation without sounding completely insane. His panicking cut off as a distant sound could be heard in the background of Sanji's apartment, and Sanji began shuffling his phone around in his grip.

“Hold on, someone's at the door.” Sanji muttered, “I'll call you back.”

“NO! Wait!” Zoro bellowed into the phone just as he heard an audible click and cursed loudly as the line went dead. “Sanji!”

Zoro stood for a long moment staring down at his phone as a cold dread began to slide down his veins in an icy trickle; an unpleasant sensation in his gut starting to mount. All of his training told him something was wrong, even though a small part of him was screaming to stay rational and not do anything crazy that he might regret. The debate in his head kept him frozen to the spot as he desperately tried to think of any solid proof he had to back up his insane theory.

A horrified thought occurred to him. Beginning to sweat profusely as he handled the phone with weary trepidation, flipping it over and gripping it in a shaky hand. Fingers slipped a few times as he tried to get his nails under the back to pry it off.
He finally managed it, the cover falling from between lax fingers, revealing the battery and the internal circuits. His stomach dropped as he reached out with trembling fingers to pluck out a bug that had been wired into the phone, holding it aloft as terror now ran through his veins.

They had heard everything...

Phone slipping from between numb fingers, the shattering on the floor echoed in the small area as Zoro remained still for several seconds. The reality of what was happening was still sinking in. Whoever was after him, whatever they wanted, they had been listening to every call he had had with the blond, every message. And now they no doubt knew he had called to warn him.

Suddenly, his fear was no longer keeping him pinned to the spot, but instead, it sparked a rush of adrenaline that had him surging into action. Tearing open his storage cabinet with a vengeance, he began pulling out everything he needed while the freezing terror was instead exchanged for burning fury.

Military pants and shirt replaced his running gear in just a few moments, his old combat boots pulled on and laced up snug. Throwing open the door to his equipment, he snagged a shoulder harness off the hook and began looping it over his shoulders, quickly lashing the front together before sliding a pistol in each holster before reaching for his belt.

Looping it around his hips swiftly, he already began filling the empty pockets with extra mags as he rushed upstairs, stopping only to throw on his jacket to cover up the weapons as he burst out the front door in a rush. The drive over to Sanji’s in his truck was a blur of panic, adrenaline, and several skipped red lights before he was skidding into the loading zone out front and leaving his idling truck behind as he rushed inside.

Taking the stairs two at a time, he soon found himself on Sanji's floor, quieting his steps as he neared and keeping his hearing pinned for any signs of a struggle. Once at the door, he listened for a few moments but heard nothing as the panic began to manifest itself into a breathless tightness just below his sternum.

Not now...

Zoro found himself slouching into the wall, breathing becoming more difficult as the high pressure situation was causing him to relapse. Pressing the palm of his hand into his chest, he desperately tried to force himself to draw air into his increasingly tight lungs.

Even as thoughts whirled around his head - that he was most likely over-reacting and Sanji would be fine, he couldn't seem to get his breathing in control. Edges of his vision began to blur, sending him into a horrified spiral until a muffled form of scraping from within the apartment had him snapping back into full clarity. He wasn't entirely sure what it was that was suddenly keeping him so grounded, but without pausing to question it he moved into action.

Slowly pulling a gun from the right holster, he held it confidently in his left hand as his right came up to support it. Holding it at arm's length in front of himself, he rounded on the door and readied himself to kick it in. It would be nearly impossible to explain it to Sanji if he was just imagining everything, but the risk that something was amiss was too high and he wasn't going to ignore his gut instinct over what Sanji might think. Even if that meant possibly scaring the blond away from him.

Levelling on the door, he took a calming breath as he tried to get himself back into his old mindset before bringing his leg up and kicking the door off its hinges in one smooth motion. The cheap wood went sailing into the room to land with a loud smack on the entry floor as Zoro immediately darted in, keeping low as he turned aggressively to check each corner and blind spot as he moved forward
into the apartment.

Just as he was beginning to wonder if the place was empty, he rounded into the living room and nearly startled himself when he found Sanji strapped to chair with a livid, if not relieved, look on his frazzled face. Making the mistake of dropping his guard for a second in relief of seeing Sanji alive, he made the crucial error of not checking a corner as something darted forward when his gun was lowered.

Turning around a moment too late, a body pounced on him, hands coming up and over in a motion that could only be intended to wrap a wire around his neck and choke him. Zoro cursed as he spun on the man with furious intent, hand snagging the wire just before it could close around his neck as he pulled and twisted, dropping his gun in the struggle. Leg hooking the man's calves in a vicious swipe had the assailant flipping over to land flat on his back where Zoro pounced on top of him with his knees pinning the man's arms to the floor.

Left hand immediately falling to press into the man’s jaw bones painfully, he kept it pried open while the other swiped the gun from the left holster and levelled it on the man. With the scuffling ended, Zoro allowed himself a moment of shock before grunting, “You're the driver.”

With Zoro's hand keeping his mouth pried open, the man couldn't respond beyond giving a toothy grin and chuckling darkly with a pleased nod. Zoro took a moment to recover from the realization that it was the same man who had hit him with the truck several months ago. It was too much of a coincidence, which meant...

Zoro tightened his grip on the man's face painfully as his blinding rage was somehow managing to keep him level, “Who sent you?”

The question was just met with another chuckle as Zoro could only assume he had been around town for so long to shadow him. It infuriated Zoro to no end that he hadn't noticed the man trailing him before this. It seemed suburbia really was making him go soft. His scowl darkened even further when he noted the man's tongue attempting to free one of his molars in the back.

“No.” Zoro grunted with a scowl, dropping the gun as he reached his other hand into the man's mouth to pry out the tooth he had been trying to dislodge and tossing it across the floor, “I don't think so.”

Giving one last look for any other false teeth that might hold a cyanide capsule, he finally released the man's jaw and snatched up his gun once more. Cocking it and training it directly to the man's forehead, he once more levelled on the man with the intention of finding out who the hell he was and what he had done to Sanji.

Before Zoro could get any words out, the man underneath him started chuckling smugly as his body went lax in defeat. His hands fell to his sides as maniacal happiness lit up his eyes, and Zoro finally noticed the odd shape of the man's torso that he had been sitting on. Free hand coming down to rip open the man’s shirt, he glimpsed what was very clearly a massive amount of C-4 taped to his chest with a detonator.

Without even hesitating, he fired a bullet into the man’s head - the noise thankfully muffled by the silencer - before he bolted over to Sanji. Picking him up - chair and all – and running down the hall as far as he could make it before an audible click echoed through the apartment and Zoro was forced to throw Sanji to the floor and dive on top of him.

A deafening explosion rattled the building as walls were torn to shreds, furniture was sent flying, and the foundation of the entire building shook. Shrapnel was sent hurtling around the room, several
shards ending up in his back but he refused to move from his place on top of the blond until the commotion had ended.

Ears ringing from the blast, Zoro cautiously raised his head and looked back through the debris and thick dust hanging in the air. Flames already licking at the more flammable items in the living room and the charred remains of the assassins body. Low visibility and contaminated air made his chest tighten and breathing laboured as panic started to creep it's way back. Sanji coughed under him, and Zoro snapped his gaze back to the blond, the man's presence bringing about a calm inside him, his concern for Sanji overpowering the panic.

“You okay?!” Zoro asked him immediately, surprisingly steady hands coming to grip Sanji's face and turning the man to face him, trying to stamp down his residual panic. Sanji opening eyes sent a wave of relief crashing over him, the tightness in his chest finally loosening.

Sanji winced through a painful smile, “Just some external injuries.”

Pulling out a knife and cutting the restraints, Zoro slowly helped Sanji out of the chair, the blond leaning back against the hallway wall and easing his right arm into his lap. Zoro remained crouched beside him, breathing heavily as he still was trying to fathom what had just happened and why.

The fire alarm began shrieking out through the building as someone had no doubt pulled it in their panic. Zoro's mind was already racing with different possibilities, escape times, and how to handle the situation; the seriousness of what this meant going far deeper than just a death threat on Sanji.

“Almost definitely dislocated.” Sanji surmised, pulling Zoro from his thoughts as he turned on the blond with a stern frown. Zoro knew what had to be done from here on out, and also knew that Sanji was definitely not going to like it; if anything, what was about to happen was probably going to make Sanji hate him.

Pulling himself closer, he took up Sanji's injured arm, while mentally tallying the amount of time they had before the fire department would arrive – followed by the paramedics – and figuring out just how small their window of escape would be. His hand took a firm grip on Sanji's upper arm as his other came to rest on the blond's shoulder; wanting to apologize as there was no time to be gentle with the man.

“Woah! Woah! Hey!” Sanji protested loudly as he attempted to weakly wave Zoro off with his other arm, obviously still in shock from the explosion as his actions were a little dazed. Closing his eyes out of guilt, Zoro jerked hard in one single motion, without warning while Sanji was still speaking, “I'm the nurs—”

Cut off in the middle of his sentence, Sanji screamed, a pained and keen sound, breaking Zoro's heart into hundred pieces.

Several moments passed as Sanji whimpered in pain before going completely stiff and holding his breath as he seemed to fear moving lest he cause any further pain to himself. He finally released a breath after a while and his shoulders fell, eyes flying open in surprise as he glanced down at his arm and moved it carefully to find it fully functional.

“You're...” Sanji murmured in quiet surprise, “actually not bad at that.”

Pushing himself to his feet as they needed to leave now before they began inhaling more smoke than they already had, he offered his hand out to the blond who was understandably weary, but took it anyway and allowed Zoro to haul him to his feet.
“Had to do it to myself a few times.” Zoro explained tersely.

“Oh, yeah?” Sanji questioned sardonically, cradling his arm as he muttered through gritted teeth, “Care to elaborate?”

Zoro just shook his head shortly, grabbing Sanji’s wrist and begun to guide the still shocked man out of the room. Gathering up his guns that had somehow managed to survive the blast and reholstering them, he answered, “Classified.”

“‘Course it is…” Sanji mumbled with a hard roll of his eyes, speaking more to himself than to Zoro as he slowly released his elbow and began testing the limits of his arm. Reaching the door to Sanji’s apartment, they stepped over it’s remains from where Zoro had kicked it in and made their way out into the hallway, blending in the crowd of people, all trying to make their way outside.

No one was really rushing as false alarm fire drills happened all the time – most of the tenants looked more annoyed than anything else. Zoro had to make an effort to keep his guns concealed under his jacket. Once out the front doors, Zoro directed Sanji through the mass of people gathering outside to look up at the building to try and figure out which apartment might be the cause of the alarm, faces dropping as people began to realize from the smoke that the alarm was far more serious than they had initially thought.

Getting Sanji over to his truck, Zoro opened the passenger door for him as the blond finally seemed to be coming back to his senses, his gaze travelling from the burning building to Zoro before asking incredulously, “Shouldn’t we wait for the cops?!”

“No.” Zoro grunted sternly.

“Okay…” Sanji mused, nodding as he continued with a hint of hysteria in his tone, “and why not?”

“Because I don’t know who sent him.” Zoro responded quickly, getting more and more impatient as he could distantly hear the sounds of fire trucks nearing their location. Even when they arrived it would be a while before they started questioning bystanders, but he wanted to be long gone by then.

“What do you mean?” Sanji frowned in concern, hand coming up to hold open the door Zoro was slowly trying to close on him.

Casting a furtive look around before levelling back on the blond, Zoro murmured conspiratorially, “He could’ve been CIA.”

“Weren’t you CIA?” Sanji balked, “Why the fuck would they want to kill you?”

“I know a lot of things that people don’t want getting out.” Zoro explained tersely, stalking in closer to the man and angling the door a bit more closed so that hopefully no one would overhear, “If one day someone decides that the information needs to be buried; they could choose to have me killed.”

“Well…” Sanji floundered, “What if it is the CIA?”

“Then I’m gonna kill the bastard that gave the order.” Zoro affirmed darkly.

“Oh.” Sanji clipped sarcastically, “Wonderful. And why can’t I stay here?”

“Because they might come back.” Zoro barked, allowing a little bit of his panic and anger to slip through and immediately regretting it upon seeing Sanji’s change in expression. Desperately fighting to soften his tone as he urge quietly, “Now please, get in the truck.”
Sanji was understandably weary but finally followed Zoro's orders and climbed into the vehicle, closing the door behind himself as he waited for Zoro to get in on the driver's side. Throwing it in drive, Zoro sped out of the lot as fast as he could, passing by the side of the building that brought Sanji's – now engulfed in flames – apartment into view, causing the blond to mutter numbly, “My... my apartment...”

“I'll buy you a new one.” Zoro muttered shortly.

“I'll buy you a new one.” Sanji mimicked in a horrible imitation of Zoro's voice, waving his head mockingly as he said it before rounding on the man in a completely serious tone and snapping, “Who the fuck says shit like that?”

Passing by the fire truck headed in the opposite direction, Zoro finally took his gaze off the road to look the blond directly in the eye. And Sanji must have seen something there because the anger abated long enough for Zoro to state firmly, “I'll make this up to you; I promise.”

~X~

Inside Zoro's house, Sanji stood on the second bottom step of the basement still in a state of shock as he cradled his injured arm while Zoro ran about throwing the necessary items into a bag. All the unmarked bills he had kept stored in an explosive proof safe, along with several fake identities, passports, a burner phone – his was now useless after being tapped – and other espionage documents that had been of use in his former career.

Throwing in a few holsters, his three favourite guns, and all his remaining ammo, he headed back upstairs with Sanji in tow. Tossing the bag aside on the couch, he began flipping through a small black book he had snagged from a hidden hole in the wall downstairs as Sanji began to come around.

“Why'd that guy try to kill me?” Sanji asked softly, clearly worried as his voice came out shaky and barely noticeable.

Zoro guiltily ignored it as there was no way he could answer without divulging more than he was comfortable with, instead focusing more on finding the number of the pilot he needed to get them out of Merryville as Sanji seemed to grow irritable at being ignored. Stepping forward and grabbing Zoro's attention by snagging the front of his shirt with far more force and ferocity than Zoro would have expected from the usually gentle paramedic.

“Why'd that guy try to kill me?” Sanji repeated with a growl, his words quiet but his tone unmistakably livid in his hysteria, and when Zoro didn't initially answer he jerked his grip aggressively and added, “Huh?!”

Teeth clenching, the muscles in his jaw worked in agitation as he knew there was no way he could lie to the blond about it now; there was no conceivable lie that would make sense, desperately wishing there was something else he could say before Sanji's impatient glare had him resigning himself to his humiliation.

“They came for you because of me.” Zoro informed shortly, not intending on this being the way that Sanji found out about his obscure feelings for the other man. If he had had it his way then Sanji would have likely never found out at all.

“Wha-?” Sanji balked, grip on Zoro faltering as it was clearly not what he had been expecting to hear before managing to recover his aplomb and demand, “Why on earth would they do that?!”
“They know how I feel about you.” Zoro admitted flatly.

The admission had Sanji freezing in his tracks, gaze burning into Zoro shrewdly as a small frown graced his features and he blinked in genuine confusion, “What?”

“They've been watching me; monitoring my calls.” Zoro explained, keeping the bitterness from his tone as he admitted things to the man that he hadn't even been comfortable admitting to himself. Not only that, he hated that these strangers had been privy to his conversations with Sanji and had probably, even known before him, how important Sanji had become, “They've seen how I am around you.”

“And...?” Sanji pressed, still clearly confused. “How are you around me?”

“I care about you.” Zoro murmured quietly, watching Sanji with regret radiating off of himself in waves as the blond just stared back incredulously. Probably not even aware that his hair elastic had slipped and was now barely keeping his hair tied back; most of it falling into his confused blue eyes.

“What about your wife?” Sanji uttered in bewilderment, “Our friends; you care about them right?”

“They're not in any danger. And Kalfia can take care of herself, but they wouldn't go after her anyway.” Zoro stiffly muttered, “They would know that our marriage has been over for months.”

“Oh, yeah?” Sanji laughed hollowly, “And what makes me so special?”

“They went after you because they knew you'd be the best leverage on me.” Zoro admitted, a little frustrated that he had to spell it out for the daft blond, wishing that there was anything else he could tell him besides the truth, “Because I like you.”

A heavy silence hung in the air between the two men as the situation finally clicked and Sanji's eyes widened in surprise at the revelation. Zoro's shoulders tensed incredibly as he couldn't bring himself to meet the blond's gaze, painfully aware of what the response would be, almost hating Sanji for immediately piping up with words he no doubt thought would help ease the rejection.

“Zoro...” Sanji began carefully, tone utterly shocked as Zoro kept his head turned firmly to the side as he had already known Sanji's response before admitting it, “I--”

“Don't.” Zoro interrupted shortly, “I get it.”

Zoro couldn't bring himself to look at the blond but he could tell from the palpable tension in the room that the blond's shoulders were no doubt hunched in guilt. A struggle was clearly taking place within the blond's head as he fought to come up with something to say, and Zoro already didn't want to know the details of it. Certain that words would hurt far more than he already knew that they would.

“I would...” Sanji began lamely, floundering as he waved his hands in a desperate attempt to get the words out as he rambled on before he trailed off pitifully and once more cast his gaze aside, “I just... I'm...”

Zoro finished each sentence Sanji was struggling to get out perfectly in his head, not needing or wanting the blond to try and continue with his unflattering rejection. It was clear that Sanji didn't want him, and while he may be trying to lighten the blow he was in fact making the whole ordeal much more painful than was necessary. Cutting him off once more Zoro said succinctly, “I understand; it's fine.”

Sanji opened his mouth as he still seemed desperate to try and make things right, but a look from
Zoro had his words falling short and he closed his mouth silently. Muttering a hushed, “I'm sorry.”

“Don't be.” Zoro reassured sternly, turning back to the discarded black book as he muttered, “It's my fault.”

Sanji deflated hopelessly – still looking like he desperately had something else to say – but remained silent as he watched Zoro return to his book. Flipping through his contacts hurriedly until he finally came across the name and number of the man he needed, and began punching it in on the burner phone. Taking Sanji's stunned silence as an opportunity to hit call and grunting into the phone when the line was answered, “Hey, Rayleigh.”

“Roronoa?” Came the raspy response, “It's been years.”

“I don't have time to chat.” Zoro cut the man off quickly, “Someone has been tracking me and I nearly got taken out this afternoon; how soon can you be at Merryville airfield?”

“Two hours.” Rayleigh supplied easily, “Sorry to hear about that; not exactly a peaceful retirement.”

“We can talk later.” Zoro urged firmly, “See you there.”

Without waiting for a response, Zoro hung up the phone and pocketed it as he finished zipping up his bag and began heading upstairs for a couple last items. Sanji trailed behind curiously as it was clear that despite the blond reeling from their conversation, he was still a blatant concoction of annoyance, anger, and agitation over everything else that had happened.

“Who was that?” Sanji asked apprehensively as he cautiously followed Zoro to the landing of the first floor. Keeping a few steps behind him as Zoro made for the bedroom, “What was that about the airfield?”

“Friend.” Zoro grunted as he began pulling some spare clothes from the closet – both his and Sanji's clothes having gotten significantly burnt and torn in the explosion – while he continued absently, “We need to get to Japan.”

“WE?!” Sanji screeched, eyes wide in disbelief, “What the fuck do you mean we?!”

“It's not safe here.” Zoro muttered, throwing the clothes into a separate bag along with a few other things. He then attempted to leave the room before having his path blocked by an enraged blond as he amended, “If I leave you here then someone else will try to use you to get to me again.”

“But JAPAN?!” Sanji implored, uninjured arm beginning to flail hysterically, “Why do we have to go to Japan?! Can't you just call somebody and get this sorted out?!”

“I already told you; I don't know who's after me.” Zoro repeated somewhat irritably, “If I were to leave you with someone at the CIA, I could very well be handing you over to the same person responsible for trying to take your life this afternoon. Rayleigh is one of the handful of guys I know I can trust. On the other hand I can think of a couple hundred people that would love to see me dead.”

The reply seemed to pacify the blond a little, and gave Zoro enough reprieve to dart past him and head back downstairs. Mentally tallying up everything he had already packed, he tried to think of anything else he might need while he still had the opportunity to grab it.

“What's in Japan?” Sanji broke the silence that had begun to stretch between them. Zoro turned to see Sanji halted at the bottom of the stairs with his good arm still resting on the handrail. While much calmer than before, it was obvious that he was hurt, and afraid, and it caused Zoro's chest to ache in guilt.
Knowing that he was the cause of all of it, and also knowing that there was really nothing he could do or say to make it better. Even pulling the man into his arms and promising him nothing else bad would ever happen to him wasn't enough to make up for everything; it wasn't like the blond would let him do that anyway. Instead, Zoro just had to stand in his shameful guilt at the realization he had probably hurt Sanji more in these last few hours than anyone else ever had.

““I have some informants there that can hopefully get me some information on what's going on.” Zoro divulged softly, the initial anger and consternation that had been coursing through him since they had gotten back leeching from him, replaced only by self-hatred over how he had behaved towards the blond in his panic, “Once I know who's after me, it'll be easy to put a stop to all of this…””

“I have a job; a life…” Sanji argued before trailing off as his eyes grew wide in horrified realization, “I can't just-- Oh... god...They'll think I'm dead…”

“It's better this way.” Zoro replied softly.

“Better?!?” Sanji bellowed, his placid demeanour swiftly forgotten for indignation, “You think my friends and family thinking I'm dead is fucking better?!”

“It'll only be for a few days until they identify the body in your apartment as not being yours.” Zoro clarified rationally, “And a few days would be a massive head start for me to figure out who is behind this.”

“This isn't fair…” Sanji murmured in defeat, distraught pain creasing his face into something heartbreaking as he choked out, “All of it... And you expect me to pick up and leave on some trip because you have some unfinished CIA business to attend to; I'm not part of this.”

“You became part of this when you forced yourself into my life,” Zoro grunted back childishly as he knew it was an unfair jab at the other man. He pointedly kept his gaze away from the blond as he knew that if he did, the well of guilt pooling in his chest would swallow him whole.

“How the hell was I supposed to know this was part of the deal?!” Sanji bit back, “It's not like when you make friends with someone, ‘might get assassinated’ is on the list?!”

“Look,” Zoro growled earnestly, meeting Sanji's gaze and hating the pain he saw there. Forcing his voice to remain as gentle as possible while he reassured, “Once I figure out what's going on I'll bring you back here and have you under protective surveillance from people I trust; you can go back to your life like nothing's happened.”

“I…” Sanji fumbled in surprise, still a little taken aback by what Zoro had just said. “But…”

“You won't have to hear from me ever again.”

“That's not... I mean, I... What...” Sanji stumbled over his words several times in an attempt to respond to Zoro in any way, but it seemed as though he just couldn't simply wrap his head around what was currently happening, no doubt still a little shell shocked. Finally giving up and throwing his good arm in the arm as he muttered hopelessly “Alright…”

~X~

Even though it was summer, the evening wind carried a slight chill to it as it whipped at Zoro's hair playfully. Phone held to his ear as he finished explaining the situation to his wife – however leaving out some less important details involving a certain blond – and his current location.

“You want me to come with you?” Kalifa asked seriously, the genuine sentiment meaning the world
to him, but also aware that there was no way he could bring her along. Not without having to explain why Sanji was with him, and that was a conversation he was hoping to never have.

“No.” Zoro murmured gently, “It’s alright.”

“You sure it's safe?” She inquired in concern, clearly alluding to his mental state rather than the physical risk of what he was planning to do, “Going alone?”

The question had him pausing because in all honesty he wasn’t certain; this was the least certain he had ever been of his capabilities in his life. He had been out of the field for years, his mental state had improved but he still was not in perfect control, and he was way too emotionally invested in the target.

But when he glanced over at Sanji – the blond still looking weary and dazed as he talked to Rayleigh – Zoro had never felt more certain in his life. Even if Sanji might hate him, even after all this was over and he may never see Sanji ever again; it was worth it to make sure Sanji got out of this safely.

“Yeah.” Zoro murmured softly as he continued to gaze at the blond intently, “I'm sure.”

TBC...

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to @zosanlaw on tumblr for doing an amazing beta job <333

I know a lot happened this chapter, but I hoped you all enjoyed it! Things are finally starting to get rolling and I'm super excited about what's coming next :D There was a bit of angst, but there will be a much calmer resolution next chapter.
Thorn in my Side
Dark sky shrouded the aircraft as it made its way across the expansive ocean far below. After takeoff, Zoro had managed to approach Sanji long enough to offer the blond a change of clothes and access to the large bathroom near the rear of the plane. The blond took his time as Zoro used the reprieve to properly go through his bags and sort out everything they needed.

Money, passports, and other miscellaneous documents were all stored in a compact container which he shoved to the bottom of his rucksack; pocketing a decent amount of Yen to hopefully cover them until they reached Tokyo. He added his spare ammunition and weapons, before topping it all off with a change of clothes, discarding everything else he didn't need back into the duffel bag as he had no wish to lug around a bulky item once they landed. It would be best for them to blend in as much as
possible until they got into the city.

Sanji exited the bathroom sometime later looking much cleaner – the ash scrubbed from his face and the minor injuries from the shrapnel tidied as well. The spare jeans and button up Zoro had grabbed for the man fit almost perfectly and Zoro forcibly glanced away before the blond could catch him staring.

Before Zoro could get a chance to say anything upon the blond's return, Sanji was taking a seat near the opposite corner of the plane and gazing out the window irritably. Zoro couldn't blame him, and while he was relieved he didn't have to talk about their situation anymore, he felt that he still owed the blond something - considering the ordeal he had gotten him into.

A moment of debate had him deciding against it and he pushed himself to his feet, grabbing his own change of clothes and the first aid kit before heading into the bathroom. Locking the door behind himself as he made his way over to the small mirror installed above the metal sink.

Shucking off his jacket, he turned it over to see how bad the damage was from the explosion - leather managing to absorb most of the shrapnel he had taken while covering Sanji. Shifting to get a look at his back he found the white shirt stained a dark pink in several places where the debris had managed to penetrate a bit deeper than he thought.

Steeling himself for the real reason he had sought out solitude, he glanced down at the large piece of wood that had gotten lodged in his hip. Jacket thankfully hiding it from Sanji, the injury had made itself plaintively known after the adrenaline of the incident had worn off a couple hours later.

Unlooping his belt, he folded it in half and placed it between his teeth. Biting down on it and giving a steady exhale through his nose, he took a firm grip on the fragment and pulled. Teeth crunched into the belt, the leather muffling his pained groan as his other arm reached out to the sink in support.

Reeling from the wave of pain flaring up his side, breathing becoming heavier while bile stung the back of his throat. The belt fell to the floor with a clatter a few moments later, once he knew he would no longer be needing it to muffle any more cries.

Gasping, he dropped the bloody piece of wood into the sink, taking a few moments to recover before reaching down to grab the hem of the blood stained shirt, carefully removing it. He found himself wincing in agony as several of the shards clung to the fabric, getting pulled out while the pulsing, sharp jab in his side left him breathless. The bloody shirt hit the floor with a wet slop as he glanced down to his hip to see the damage.

Looking at the garish wound, he found himself getting light headed with vague memories of blood and gore. Hand gripping the edge of the sink in a death grip, he attempted to steady himself, shaking his head vigorously to try and stave off the sensations mounting and returning himself to the issue at hand.

Removing the rest of his clothes with effort, Zoro stepped into the shower to wash away the stench that had begun to linger on him as well as the blood staining half his body. He turned on the shower, hissing when the water initially hit his wound, but eventually got accustomed to it as he used the steady stream to clean it as best he could.

Dried off, and back in front of the mirror, Zoro pried open the first aid kit and began disinfecting the wound and getting the remaining slivers out as best he could. This kind of medical care was something he had been very acquainted with several years ago, but it was clear that he was rusty. Zoro was tempted to ask for Sanji's help considering the man's medical background, but he didn't want to bother the man after everything he had just been through.
With the injury finally cleaned, stitched, and patched up, he pulled on a new shirt and pants before heading back out to the main area of the aircraft. Finding Sanji exactly where he had left him, brooding in the corner, Zoro passed him by and returned to his own seat in an attempt to get as comfortable as he could with a jagged hole inflaming his side.

Despite wanting to take the time to get some rest, Zoro couldn’t calm his thoughts long enough to get a wink. Mind racing with every possibility, every question, about what had happened back in Merryville. Trying to remember if he recognized the man, even though he knew he had a bad memory when it came to all the people he had slighted.

Nearly an hour passed in the spacious cabin as Zoro continued to mull over as many factors and options as he could with no hope of getting any closer to figuring any of this out. He knew his best bet was to meet up with his former associates in Japan and try to get an idea of what was going on from there, but it was hard to keep himself from brooding.

A muffled groan had Zoro glancing over to where Sanji sat slumped by his own window, hands clasped over his face as his fingers rubbed at his closed eyes. Conflict was apparent in every line of the man’s tense form and Zoro could easily guess what might be the cause of it, hating himself for being the reason for any distress to the innocent man.

Turning his gaze back out the small window into the black night reflected outside, he hardly got a chance to fall back into his obsessive thoughts when there was a sudden motion across from him. He looked up to see Sanji falling into the seat opposite him with a resolute yet nervous expression, adjusting himself in the seat for a tad too long before clasping his hands in his lap while allowing his thumbs to fidget nervously. It took a moment of fumbling – Sanji fighting to keep eye contact with Zoro – before finally managing to calm himself enough to utter quietly, “Hey... I'm... I'm sorry.”

Zoro just raised an eyebrow in surprise. Not at all expecting that to be the first thing Sanji would say to him, and not entirely certain he deserved it. Though Sanji clearly seemed like he had more to say so Zoro remained silent, waiting for the man to continue.

“You – you did kinda save my life today...” Sanji mumbled as his gaze returned to his wringing hands as he chuckled hollowly, “Which was pretty cool.”

“It was my fault you were even in that situation.” Zoro responded calmly. Managing to get his emotions in check a while ago, he now felt ashamed for how he had reacted earlier, “It shouldn't have even happened in the first place.”

“That doesn't matter.” Sanji argued firmly, actually managing to meet Zoro’s gaze and the operative was surprised to find such fiery commitment there, “You risked your life for me... And... and I acted like a royal jackass from the moment you did.”

“You'd never been in that kind of situation before;” Zoro supplied simply. Professionally. “Your reaction was normal.”

“No, it wasn't.” Sanji muttered sternly, “I've seen worse things day to day at work; I was being irrational.”

“It's fine.” Zoro murmured, trying to be as reassuring as he could, “Seriously.”

Sanji didn’t seem satisfied with that, but it also didn't seem like he was willing to argue it either. Opting to sit silently across from Zoro as he finally realized that the blond’s fidgeting had less to do with his nerves and more to do with his smoking habit. - knees bouncing up and down in jittery agitation. Zoro made a mental note to get the man some smokes at the earliest opportunity.
Leaning forward in his seat, Zoro rested his elbows on his knees as he stared at Sanji seriously. After having the blond finally calm enough to talk to him once more, he didn't want to entirely waste the opportunity. Sanji however, looking a little weary over Zoro's aggressive posture.

“How's your shoulder?”

Hand unconsciously raising to the injury, Sanji muttered, “Muscles are starting to seize.”

Without pause, Zoro pushed himself to his feet and made for the back of the plane. Pulling out a plastic bag and beginning to fill it with ice while ignoring Sanji's barely audible protests. Returning to the man, he leaned down and pressed the ice to the wound; feeling mostly responsible for it because it had been his weight on the man that caused it.

“I... I can...” Sanji began with a nervous stutter. Zoro blinked, realising that Sanji probably wasn’t comfortable with him doting on him so closely and handed off the bag of ice to him. It would take a bit to remind himself that even though Sanji knew now, it didn't make it okay for him to be as attentive as he wanted.

Remaining standing awkwardly by Sanji’s side, hands hanging uselessly as he floundered, “How’s your head?”

“Not concussed if that’s what you’re worried about.” Sanji chuckled lightheartedly, glancing up at Zoro, readjusting the ice on his shoulder and already looking less tense as he added petulantly, “My pride's probably the most injured thing at the moment honestly.”

Zoro made a face as he returned to his chair, facing off with the other man once more as he asked, “What?”

“C'mon, having to get rescued?” Sanji prodded with a rhetorical chuckle before muttering to the side a tad bitterly, “How embarrassing is that?”

“He was a trained wet worker.” Zoro offered in a lame attempt at consoling the obviously annoyed man, “Or at the very least mafia...” He added as an afterthought. He wasn’t entirely sure why Sanji was so bothered by it, but nonetheless able to tell Sanji was more than a little ticked off.

“Still...” Sanji groused as he slouched a little in his seat, “I'd like to think that I'd be a tad better at defending myself; I mean I barely got the door open and...”

And it clicked.

It hadn't been the first time Zoro had been on a guard detail for someone who didn't believe they needed protecting, or come to rescue someone that would firmly deny his help. Sanji was just like everyone else – maybe even a bit more stubborn and prideful than some – and having to have Zoro save him was stinging his ego more than his jesting behaviour would let him admit.

Zoro opted for silence as he continued to watch the blond. Sanji shook his head in mild disbelief before waving his injured hand delicately as he groused, “You made him look like an amateur.”

Zoro shrugged, “He was.”

Normally a cocky response like that got a scathing remark back, but this time was different. Instead of playfully teasing Zoro about his former career, or challenging him, Sanji just stared at him quietly with a slightly unsettled look. Like, for the first time, Sanji was coming to understand that Zoro had never been joking any of those times he had mentioned what he used to do; like he was truly humbled.
“Anyway...” Sanji murmured, much more timidly than he had earlier, eyes keen on gazing anywhere but at Zoro as he managed stiffly, “I realized I never actually thanked you for what you did... so, thank you.”

A polite, yet slightly dismissive remark was on his tongue, and Zoro had to bite it back in favour of offering a simple, “You're welcome.”

At his admission, a look of relief finally settled over Sanji, and he seemed to genuinely relax for the first time since getting on the plane. However, his hand was still fidgeting with the pack of ice still held to his shoulder, and Zoro could tell from his body language alone that there was something still nagging at the other man. He watched wearily as Sanji finally seemed to coax himself enough to voice what was on his mind.

“A-and about what you said...” Sanji stuttered out earnestly, “Zoro... I...”

“Well, we're on route!” Rayleigh exclaimed happily as he made his way back to the lounge of his aircraft, “We'll be stopping off in Honolulu for a refill and then on to a secluded airfield in southern Hokkaido.”

Zoro took the perfectly timed interruption as an opportunity to push himself to his feet and effectively end his and Sanji's conversation. He did not need it to stray back into territory that he was no in the mood to relive at this point in time, especially not when he was already too high strung and had other, more pertinent, things on his mind.

“How long?” Zoro inquired, purposefully keeping his gaze away from Sanji, not wanting or needing to know what kind of expression might be on the man's face; this wasn't stuff they should be concerning themselves with right now. And while he was grateful for Sanji's apology and gratitude, there was only so much pity he could handle from him in one day.

“About ten hours.” Rayleigh replied before smirking at Zoro, “Figured that'd be enough time for you to catch me up on exactly what's going on.”

“Yeah, I'll be with you in a moment.” Zoro dismissed the man politely, allowing Rayleigh to return to the cockpit as he quickly went to get accommodations set up for the no doubt exhausted blond. Rayleigh's plane was thankfully far more accommodating than most commercial airlines, the cabin set up more for business and pleasure rather than maximum occupancy. Most of his clientele were either people like Zoro, or the incredibly wealthy, it made no sense to have excess seating.

Pulling down one of the folding beds built into the wall, he nabbed a pillow and blanket from a storage cupboard and made his way back over to where Sanji remained seated, offering the items that the blond took without question as Zoro ordered as politely as he could muster, “Get some sleep.”

“I don't--” Sanji began, cutting himself off at Zoro's expression.

“Try.” Zoro muttered earnestly.

Sanji still looked desperate to argue, but for once kept his complaints to himself as he moved towards the bed. Zoro headed to the front of the plane and found himself faltering in the doorway as he glanced back at the blond who was in the process of grumpily punching his pillow into shape.

Hand tightening on the handle, he realized he could've handled everything a lot better, and that he continued to mess up each interaction with the blond. Turning away with a heavy sigh, he closed the door behind himself and proceeded to take a seat in the unoccupied co-pilot chair and begun filling Rayleigh in on everything that had happened.
Early afternoon had the three men standing outside the idling aircraft as they bid farewell. Engines roared overhead as they whipped up the grass on the poorly tended field and cancelled out all surrounding noise. Zoro had finished thanking Rayleigh when Sanji stepped forward and offered a hand, yelling over the raucous noise, “Thank you for everything!”

“My pleasure.” Rayleigh chuckled loudly, returning Sanji's handshake firmly with a broad grin as he gestured towards Zoro, “Take care of this one.”

“Don't think that'll be an issue.” Sanji retorted with a snort. Releasing Rayleigh's hand and making his way over to Zoro, the two of them took off across the small field towards the highway just visible from the airstrip. Getting nearly halfway across the field, they stopped to watch the aircraft take off into the afternoon sky in a whirl of dust and leaves.

It wasn't long before the aircraft was completely out of sight and Zoro and Sanji were suddenly very alone in the quiet countryside. They hiked across a gravelly field towards the distant road as the sun beat down on them through a clear blue sky, the rolling green hills surrounding them in the distance. The silence was broken by a single bird whistling a tune as it flew overhead until Sanji finally piped up, “Clarify something for me.”

Zoro grunted.

“Did we just enter a country illegally?”

“Technically?” Zoro rebuffed lightly.

Sanji raised a skeptical brow, “There's a 'technically'?”

Zoro shrugged, not entirely sure if the blond was being rhetorical or not. Also he wasn't entirely positive if the man would want the long or the short answer. But before he got the chance to respond, Sanji was waving his hands dismissively and shaking his head.

“Never mind; I don't want to know.”

They left it at that, Zoro just grinning to himself as they neared the road and climbed out of the ditch, and began to walk along the endless asphalt. Sanji remained quiet as they trekked in silence and Zoro awaited any sign of a vehicle coming their way.

Sticking his thumb out the first couple times failed, until eventually a farming truck with a flatbed pulled up on the edge of the road in front of them. Zoro trotted over to the open passenger side window to begin conversing with the man in his native language for a few minutes. The man eventually pointed to the back of the truck and Zoro patted the side of the door with a grateful smile and a thankful reply.

He made his way back to where Sanji stood with a perplexed expression wrought on his young face. Pulling himself into the back of the truck, Zoro had to fight a wince as the motion pinched the wound in his side unpleasantly. If Sanji caught the look then he said nothing, instead opting for standing behind the still idling truck with his arms raised out to his sides in a confused shrug.

“I have so many questions.”

Tossing his bag near the back, Zoro looked down at the blond from where he stood and quirked his head tiredly to the side before ordering, “Get in.”
Sanji’s arms dropped with a disgruntled moue, but he followed the order regardless. Both of them sat as far back as they could as the driver took off on the road once more and the roaring engine drowned out any awkward silence that would’ve been present between them.

Countryside passed for several hours as rolling hills turned into crowded mountains before mellowing out into larger valleys - endless fields of waving, golden wheat that swelled hypnotically under the bright summer sun; speeding through small farm towns that seemed almost abandoned as the truck continued its journey south. All the while Sanji looked out upon the horizon with reluctant awe; the scenery clearly managing to distract him from his earlier anxiety.

Zoro took the opportunity to curl into himself and let the rocking of the truck lull him into a light sleep while cradling his still aching side. He winced into his collar, knowing that the injury was definitely going to be a hindrance in this whole ordeal until he managed to stitch it up properly and it began healing.

~X~

Zoro’s eyes fluttered open as he felt the truck begin to slow to a stop. He glanced over to see a weight on his shoulder that was caused by Sanji’s head, slumped onto him with his adorable mess of tousled hair splayed across Zoro’s shoulder as the blond snoozed softly, his mouth hanging slightly open. Warmth radiated off of him and kept the twilight chill at bay. It also ignited a yearning in his chest that he had to forcefully stomp out as the truck lurched to a halt.

Regretfully and softly pushing Sanji off his shoulder, Zoro hauled himself to his feet and resolutely went about forgetting the feeling of having Sanji so close to him as the blond started to wake up. Snatching up his pack and hopping off the back of the truck, Zoro gestured for Sanji to follow. The sleepy blond complied, remaining on the sidewalk, yawning, as Zoro ran up to thank the driver once more before returning to the blond’s side.

“C’mon.”

“Ugh.” Sanji grumbled irritably, eyes still mostly shut as he blindly allowed Zoro to lead him down the sidewalk and towards the docks, “Where now?”

“Ferry.”

“Ugh...”

~X~

Nearly a full day of journey on the ferry took them along the coast of Japan before docking at a small port on the outskirts of Tokyo. Sanji spent most of it out on deck puffing away on a pack of cigarettes he had managed to procure from the convenience shop on board. He seemed intent on smoking his anxiousness away. Zoro took the time to nap for as long his irritating wound would allow.

After disembarking the ferry, it was another long bus ride into Tokyo until they were finally nearing their destination. Zoro took Sanji to a more heavily crowded shopping district as they wouldn’t be able to head to his informant’s until after dark, and surely not before dealing with the man that had been trailing them since Tsuchiura.

Not wanting to startle Sanji, or have him give away that Zoro was aware of the other man, they went about the day as normally as possible. They stopped to grab some clothes other than the single pair they each wore, found a street side vendor for a bite to eat, and located some much needed smokes
for Sanji; all the while keeping an eye on the foreign man that was getting bolder as the day wore on.

Pulling Sanji into a nearby store, he guided the blond down the aisles while attempting to remain casual. Stopping to pick out things that he had absolutely no interest in, he made an attempt to look them over thoughtfully, occasionally offering Sanji something as he tried to manoeuvre the man through the large shopping complex.

It seemed that the tourist gambit could only last so long until Sanji was catching on to the vibe Zoro was giving off. Remaining aloof as he picked up a shirt and inspected the adorable animated creature on the front, he muttered to Zoro, “What are we doing?”

“Waiting for someone.” Zoro replied simply as he rotated the small glass figurine over in his grasp with a false look of interest, making sure to keep his mouth obscured by his collar as he spoke so that whomever was watching them wouldn’t be able to read his lips.

“Who?” Sanji prodded, folding the shirt and replacing it on the shelf as Zoro reshelved the item and strode further into the shop with Sanji on his heels.

“Don't know.” He shrugged honestly.

“Cheers.” Sanji snorted sardonically, “That's real helpful.”

Ducking under some low hanging merchandise and colourful banners, he managed to loop back around and get back out onto the crowded street. Casting a furtive look to assure that the man was still somewhere in the store, he took off down the street with Sanji stumbling over himself as he muttered swiftly, “C'mon.”

“What?” Sanji managed in his confusion, dodging around a large group of tourist before darting up to Zoro's side once more while trying to maintain pace with him.

“We're meeting our colleague.”

“Now?!” Sanji intoned, perplexed, “Who?”

“Don't know.”

“I swear to Go-” Sanji was cut off by Zoro grabbing his wrist and hauling him along into the crowded street, needing to get ahead of the man tailing them so he could get a good opportunity to get the drop on him. They managed to duck and weave through traffic long enough that the man was almost a full block behind them as Zoro began keeping an eye out for a perfect place to ambush him.

Rounding the corner into a fairly secluded alley, Zoro immediately reached down and began undoing the buckle on his belt while ignoring the garbled noise Sanji made in the back of his throat. Finally unhooking it, he pulled the leather free from his belt loops in one fluid motion before glancing up at the blond who was watching him with an incredulous expression.

“While I'm quite flattered,” Sanji mused while holding up his hands, “This is hardly the time or place.”

Folding the leather in half, he offered it to the blond with a serious glare and muttered, “Bite down on this.”

“Uh...” Sanji merely hummed in blatant confusion and made no move to take the belt, “Not really in the mood yet; your foreplay is lacking.”
Zoro refrained from barking at the man and just continued to stare at him.

“Fine.” Sanji rolled his eyes and snatched the belt out of the man's hands, keeping it folded as he put it in his mouth and bit down on it. Talking around it, his words came muffled as he questioned, “Why am I doing this?”

Zoro didn’t respond, turning to pin his back up against the wall behind him as he reached out a hand and tangled it in the blond's shirt, dragging him over and making him stand the same as he kept a hand on his chest to prevent him from attempting to move from their hiding spot. Sending a quick glance Sanji's way he gave a small, “Shh.”

Sanji just huffed indignantly around the leather still clasped between his teeth, shaking his head in credulity and rolling his eyes before letting his head fall back against the wall. Hands lifting in an exasperated motion before falling to his sides as Zoro turned back to gaze out of the alley, waiting as the footsteps he had been anticipating grew nearer.

The man rounded the corner and Zoro’s left arm lashed out to viciously tangle in the hair at the back of his head as he turned and hauled the man into the alley, swivelling on his heel before slamming the man's face directly into the wall between himself and Sanji, the man's nose connecting with an audible crack and subsequent squelch that had Sanji screaming around the belt in his mouth.

Releasing the man’s head, Zoro let him fall to the ground where his obliterated face became exposed to the both of them just as Sanji’s muffled scream came to halt. Cocking his head to the side Zoro frowned as he tried to think if he had ever seen the man's face before in his previous work, as Sanji took the belt out of his mouth and hissed quietly, “What the fuck?!”

“He started following us a while back.” Zoro explained easily as he finished doing up his belt that he had snatched from Sanji’s lax grip. He dropped into a crouch to pat the man down and found no identification on him before pushing himself back to his feet in dismay.

“Is he alive?” Sanji asked quietly, still obviously a little shaken over what he had just witnessed but was now handling it surprisingly well compared to the first time, edging towards the body with horrified curiously as Zoro picked up his discarded backpack and hefted it back on.

“Probably.” Zoro grunted as he turned to leave.

They would need to move now. Not only would the body be discovered soon, but this would only give them so much of a head start before whomever this man worked for would send someone else. And he wasn't in the mood for giving away his informant’s location to anyone who was after him.

“Hey. Hey. Hey.” Sanji stammered as he reached out towards Zoro’s retreating figure, “We can't just leave him.”

Zoro debated saying nothing and simply dragging the blond away, but he also knew it wouldn't exactly help his case in getting the blond to trust him again. He crossed his arms over his chest in exasperation as he caved, “Fine.”

The look of gratitude on the blond's face shouldn’t have caused happiness to flutter in his chest, but it did. So he stood silently and watched as the blond dropped to a knee beside the man and began inspecting him. Checking vitals, and several other things before moving to get a closer look at the
man's crushed nose, jumping back in horror as foam began sputtering from the man's mouth.

His body twitched and writhed for several moments as the cyanide capsule the man had swallowed did its job. Whomever these men worked for were quite set on not letting him find out who they worked for; not that Zoro had expected to get the information out of them anyway.

“Problem solved.” Zoro noted flatly while Sanji remained stunned beside the body, staring at the – now dead – man, in horror. However, he recovered much faster than Zoro had thought he would and swiftly pushed himself to his feet.

Brushing off his hands on his jacket, he turned to face Zoro with a calm, albeit slightly hollow expression as he began walking off down the alley in the direction Zoro had previously been headed. Zoro felt minutely guilty and added this ordeal to the lengthy list of things he'd need to make up to Sanji when he got the chance.

~X~

One more lap doubled back through the area had Zoro feeling confident there was no one else currently following them, and he began heading towards Ikeburo district. Sanji was much quieter after what had just transpired in the alley, and there wasn’t much Zoro could say to make him feel better.

It was Zoro who had ultimately killed the man, and nothing he said would probably pacify the blond in anyway. Deciding on silence as the best mediator, they continued along the streets as night fell and lamps began flickering to life. They eventually came across the decrepit, innocuous building crammed amongst a dozen others on a crowded back alley.

With the windows boarded up it appeared almost foreclosed, but without a doubt the men he was looking for would be here. Casting a furtive glance down the street, he tucked his left hand inside his jacket to get a grip on his gun before hammering on the door as loud as he could.

Steeling himself, a couple of seconds passed and he could faintly hear shuffling around just beyond the portal. Hand tightening on the grip, he braced himself and the door suddenly swung open to reveal a man with arms spread wide and a beaming smile on his tattooed face.

“BRO--”

Zoro was dashing inside the doorway in a flash, hand coming up to clamp over the man's mouth and slamming him up against the opposing wall, keeping him pinned as someone rounded the corner at the commotion and Zoro's gun was drawn in a flash and trained on the other man's forehead. Everyone stood frozen in the entryway with the two men holding their hands up in surrender to Zoro.

“What is it with you and pointing guns at people?!” Sanji barked, storming inside and slamming the door behind himself as he looked between the three men with credulity. Zoro refrained from telling Sanji off for talking so loudly, but the man at least had the decency to follow him inside and shut the door so no one passing by would see.

“H-hey, Zoro.” The one with the gun trained to his head chuckled nervously, “Long time no see.”

“Yosaku.” Zoro nodded politely, muzzle still sticking to the man’s forehead, before glancing back at the other man still pinned to the wall. Glaring pointedly down at him to hopefully get the point across of how serious the situation was, he hissed, “You gonna be quiet?”

The man nodded slowly, and Zoro released his hold on the man and stepped back to allow him to
recollect his bearings. Though he was clearly not too rattled as Zoro's hand was barely removed before a massive grin was splitting his face.

“You know them?” Sanji demanded incredulously.

“Friends.” Zoro grunted.

“You treat all your friends this way?!” Sanji barked before holding up a hand, “You know what; don't answer that. I already know because that's how I got in this situation.”

“I like him.” Yosaku noted, “Where'd you dig him up, Roronoa?”

Zoro just rolled his eyes in exasperation, retracting his gun and backing away far enough to holster it and glance between the two. “Anyone else here?”

“Nope.” Yosaku smirked, glancing between the two men before gesturing further into the small house, “Care for a drink?”

“Please.” Sanji muttered over top of Zoro's response, pushing past Zoro and following the other man, being oddly forward with people he didn't know, though Zoro assumed that Sanji must trust them if he did. His attempt to follow the blond was interrupted by Yosaku sweeping him up in a rib crushing hug that had the air wheezing from his lungs and his wounded side searing painfully.

~X~

After taking a sweep of the complex to ascertain they were indeed alone, Zoro eventually joined the others at the large table in the messy kitchen, taking a seat just in time to catch the end of Sanji regaling the others on what they had been up to the past two days; though perhaps with a bit more dramatics than Zoro would deem necessary.

Johnny's gaze twisted around onto Zoro at his arrival and inquired in surprise, “So someone's after you?”

“You haven't heard anything?” Zoro clarified flatly.

“Sorry, Bro.” Johnny implored sincerely, waving his beer as he boasted, “Hell, if we had known we would have probably come to see you already.”

“But,” Yosaku chimed in excitedly, “if you're here then that means you're in the market for a few things.”

“I need more money and weapons than I was able to bring.” Zoro explained and then proceeded to jerk his thumb to the blond beside him, “Also some identification for this one so it'll be easier to move around.”

“Shouldn't be a problem.” Johnny assured happily, “Everything can be ready to go by morning; if you're able to stay that long.”

“Got a rat off our trail earlier today.” Zoro roused, already mentally calculating how long it had been since dealing with the man and likely how long they'd have before needing to move again. If even Johnny and Yosaku were in the dark about this then it was clearly something a bit bigger than a grudge, “I'd say we have at least an eighteen hour head start.”

“I think we heard about that,” Yosaku chuckled, “Guy found in alley; face all smashed up. Not your M.O.”
“That's the point.” Zoro muttered quietly. It wouldn't do any good disguising their deaths if they were all sent by the same person, however covering his tracks from the public eye or even from the CIA was crucial. And if it did turn out to be several different people after him then it would make it even harder for him to be tracked.

“They must be pretty stupid if they think they can get you.” Johnny cackled as he cracked open another drink, foam hissing through the top as he took a messy swallow. Slamming the can back on the table afterwards, he grinned, “I mean, coming after you solo; they clearly have a death wish.”

“What's that supposed to mean?” Sanji asked in genuine curiosity, glancing between Zoro and the other two men as he returned to the table with his second beer, cracking open his drink and falling into a chair opposite Zoro.

“One on one combat with this guy is suicidal.” Johnny chuckled while jerking a thumb towards Zoro, “Hell, he was the CIA's top agent for a while; did a couple black op missions on his own which is batshit crazy.”

“So you were pretty ‘big league’, huh?” Sanji mused, casting a playful smile Zoro's way as he could no doubt see the hint of a blush creeping up Zoro's cheeks. Zoro's gaze dropped to his drink in an attempt to maintain some of his composure and maybe get control over his flushed face.

“Oh, for sure!” Yosaku agreed with an eager nod, “No safer place than with this lug; if you could have anyone as your bodyguard you'd want him.”

“Guess I'm pretty lucky.” Sanji murmured gently, the utter sincerity to his words causing Zoro's gaze to flicker up for only a moment to find Sanji watching him. A smile of gratitude on his face helped ease some of the guilt still swelling inside him before fixating his gaze back on the glass in his hand.

“Lucky?!” Johnny jeered, “Dude, you get front row seats; I'm jealous.”

“Cut it out, guys.” Zoro grumbled in embarrassment, appreciating what his old friends were saying but not in the mood to hear any of it, “I'm retired.”

“And still probably the best!” Johnny urged, before leaning in and hitting Zoro's arm playfully, “Mihawk was pretty pissed when he found out you retired.”

“I'm sure.” Zoro noted flatly.

“Who’s Mihawk?” Sanji interjected eagerly, clearly beginning to enjoy all the operative talk that Zoro had previously kept secret. Though, regarding their current situation, it now seemed utterly pointless to shield Sanji from unnecessary truths since they already had a target on both their heads for a still unknown reason.

“Top agent for MI6.” Johnny explained before whacking Zoro in the arm again. “Gave Zoro a run for his money a few times.”

“And vice versa.” Yosaku chimed in before glancing at Zoro with a jilted look, “I think Mihawk was hoping one day you'd be the one to kill him.”

“I'm sure he was devastated.” Zoro responded facetiously while rolling his eyes.

“Um...” Sanji hummed with a tone of concern, “what?”

“There's nothing worse for an agent than retirement.” Yosaku explained delicately, gaze shifting to Zoro as the other man kept his gaze trained on the table. Zoro’s shoulders had relaxed considerably,
much more comfortable talking about generics than mentioning anything that involved him. “You just can't adjust to the lifestyle after all you've been through.”

“So... death?” Sanji surmised, not sounding too impressed with the conclusion he was reaching.

“It's better than living to old age and being forced to retire,” Johnny muttered, jovial voice once again falling morose as he tilted his head towards Zoro. “Zoro unfortunately was forced to retire far too young.”

“Alright,” Sanji mused with a cautious understanding before giving a lighthearted shrug and offering, “so, what if it's Mihawk?”

“Phft! What?!” Johnny snorted into his drink.

“Yeah,” Yosaku frowned at Sanji, “What are you saying?”

“I just mean,” Sanji wistfully explained, tilting his drink to the side in a noncommittal shrug, “that if I had a rivalry with somebody that quit before it was all decided; I wouldn't let him leave the game that easily.”

Zoro finally raised his eyes from the table to look at Sanji, gaze pinned to the blond in interest as the blond brought up an idea that had obviously entered his thoughts, but not one he had paid much attention to. Despite him thinking it a bit far fetched, it was oddly captivating watching Sanji come to the same conclusion he had.

“Mihawk wouldn't send lackey's to do his work.” Johnny piped up.

“Yeah, plus,” Yosaku added, “what if one of them got him?”

“They'd get him back into fighting shape so when I eventually saw him it'd be an even match.” Sanji explained easily, before waving his hand dismissively, “But if he could be taken down by a bunch of low level thugs, then he wouldn't have even been worth confronting anyway; either way I'd have my answer.”

“Dude...” Yosaku drawled dramatically, clearly overly excited by the thought of Sanji's hunch and while Zoro did deem it an interesting one, all of them were forgetting the type of person Mihawk was.

“Yeah...” Johnny mumbled, “Kid's got a point...”

“Maybe.” Zoro muttered, not at all convinced.

“But,” Sanji mused with playful shrug, “I also have no clue what I'm talking about; so my ideas don't matter anyway.”

“Not true.” Yosaku implored, “It's fresh insight; quite fun actually.”

“Nice to know.” Sanji chuckled as he pushed himself out of his chair, tossing his empty can into a bin by the sink before gesturing down the hall, “Anyway, I need some shut eye. Jet lag is still killing my ass; and sleeping on the ferry didn't help.”

“Yeah,” Johnny nodded in understanding, gesturing down the hall, “Third door on your left.”

“Cheers.” Sanji nodded, making his way out of sight as an oddly knowing silence fell over the three men. They watched the other man leave before turning back to face each other, Zoro immediately
apprehensive to the gaze directed his way.

“And... uh.” Yosaku stalled, casting a short glance at the door leading to the other room. All three listening for the distinct sound of the door shutting before levelling back on Zoro with an air of curiosity, “Since when did that interest start?”

“Recently.” Zoro muttered shortly, not allowing the question to phase him and hoping his tone was enough to let them both know he was not in the mood to discuss it. Concluding rather quickly, “Doesn't matter; he's not interested.”

“Riiight.” Johnny mused slowly.

Zoro glowered at his old acquaintance from under his brow, daring the man to continue and infuriated in knowing that he would anyway. The fact that they had both noticed the tension between them so quickly was infuriating on its own, but that they were interrogating him was even more so.

“Listen, Zoro.” Johnny sat forward in his seat and extended a hand to reinforce his tone, “You're good, but you can also be very oblivious.”

“Get to the point, John.” Zoro stated flatly.

“Any sane person wouldn't go through all that,” Johnny waved his hand alluding to the previous ordeal back in America that they had briefed the two men with over their first beer, “then allow themselves to be dragged half way across the world for someone they hardly know.”

“We're friends.” Zoro grumbled pointedly.

“Uh huh. Yeah. Sure.” Johnny nodded in sarcastic disbelief while leaning back in his chair once more. Sending Yosaku a sideways glance before concluding snidely, “‘Friends’.”

“I don't remember ever seeing you like this before, bro.” Yosaku muttered, trying to go for a more delicate approach than his comrade, “Not even for that blond dame.”

Zoro wanted to admit to them that he had never known himself to feel like this at any point in his life either, however there was the small factor of Sanji’s disinterest that made the whole point moot. Snagging an empty beer can from off the table, he fiddled with the metal tab irritably before tossing the can across the room and into the bin as he muttered, “Doesn't matter.”

Johnny clearly did not want to let the subject go, but Yosaku at least had the courtesy to kick the other man in the shin under the table to get him to drop it. Zoro knew the both of them meant well, but he didn't need the pity party over something that was ultimately never going to change. Though that didn't stop him from fantasizing that the words they had said were true; that maybe part of the reason Sanji was here was because he cared and not because his life was in danger.

Shaking off his pathetic musings, he pushed himself out of the chair and to his feet with finality, signalling the end of the discussion. Far more interested in examining their stock of weapons than he was in analyzing his feelings, as he cast a glance around before looking down at the two with a smirk, “Care to show me what you have in stock?”

TBC...
Refrain
Eyes sliding open with reluctance, Zoro stared at the canopy of the room for several moments as shadows of early dawn crept across the ceiling. The unease of sleep had returned with a vengeance and it seemed that the stress of their situation had him back into his old habits like nothing had changed; all the progress he had made in the past couple months completely thrown out the window.

Pushing himself up with a stifled grunt, he found the wound in his side flaring up painfully; kicking himself mentally, he realized he had completely forgotten to clean and redress it before going to bed. Getting to his feet with a wince, he eventually found himself standing, albeit a little short of breath due to the pain shooting up his side.

Being careful not to wake the sleeping blond in the bed across the room, he rummaged through his pack until he found his medical kit. He softly made his way from the room, but found himself pausing at the doorway as he caught a glimpse of the sleeping blond sprawled out amongst the blankets.

Eyes peacefully shut, his messy array of curly blond hair fanned out across the pillow with his bangs falling onto his face, several rustling with each steady breath he took. Deep, calm exhales from between barely parted lips as Zoro realized he had never seen the man sleeping like this before.

The absence of all the brilliant smiles and cocky grins left his face lax and completely void of any emotion, the vulnerable expression making him seem much older. It was as though all his exhaustion and age was simply hidden by a facade of laughter and animated commentary.

Tearing his gaze away with a heavy sigh, Zoro forced himself to leave the room despite the longing burning in his chest. Stumbling into the bathroom, Zoro turned on the tap and splashed a handful of water onto his face before glancing up at himself in the mirror. He glared hard at the disgruntled expression that he met there as he continued to quietly berate himself over the feelings whirling inside him that simply refused to go away.

A twinge from his side interrupted his thoughts and brought him back to the more pertinent task at hand. Hooking his shirt up and over his head, he held his breath to keep himself from grunting at the pain throbbing his side. Wheezing a little, he flung the bloodstained rag into the tub behind him and set about tearing the makeshift bandage from the oozing wound. It was a slow process as the scabbing had begun to heal into the pores of the bandage and as Zoro pulled it away fresh blood pooled in the open crevasses.
“Oh, fuck.” Came breathlessly from the doorway and Zoro turned idly to find Sanji standing with his hand still poised on the door handle, eyes glued to Zoro's naked torso, jaw hanging slack. Standing dumbly for several moments as Zoro glanced down and noted the exposed wound he had just been examining, before looking back up at the blond, who seemed to have recovered as he coughed dryly into his fist, “Um...”

Zoro just stood silently and waited.

“That... um...” Sanji scrambled in a panicked tone, guilt scratching the back of his neck yet not raising his gaze to Zoro as he managed thickly, “That looks infected.”

Zoro shrugged at Sanji's behaviour and turned his attention back to the wound, pulling out the final bit of the bandage and tossing it into the trash, “Haven't had time to clean it.”

“When did--”

“Explosion.”

At Zoro's admission, Sanji's eyes bugged out comically as he took a horrified step into the bathroom, “What?!”

“What?” Zoro mimicked flatly.

“It's been--” Sanji paused for a moment as the time zone change had clearly messed with his internal clock. Mentally doing the math, his face contracted in concentration, before giving up and approximating to continue with his berating, “like two days!”

Zoro hummed with a hopeless shake of his head, unsure of what the blond wanted to hear, and certainly not admitting that he hadn't wanted to ask for Sanji's help, given the awkwardness that still hung between them.

“Why didn't you say something?!” Sanji continued with flustered annoyance, “I could've--”

The blond cut himself short as it became quite obvious why Zoro had decided to keep it to himself, and although the blond was clearly not happy about it, he dropped the subject. Instead, he fully entered the bathroom and shut the door behind himself, immediately setting Zoro on edge; making him feel like a trapped animal.

Fighting the urge to storm out, Zoro kept his back pinned against the sink as he watched Sanji stride over and take a seat on the edge of the tub across from Zoro. Zoro couldn't get a word in edgewise before the blond was leaning in and assessing the wound with a stern gaze.

Sanji spent several moments simply inspecting the wound before finally reaching out. His hand grazed the skin near Zoro's naval, causing the muscles to seize and jump away from the touch. Zoro hated the way the simple touch had his skin flushing with excitement, and adrenaline rushing to his extremities.

It wasn't fair.

Zoro found himself panicking, hand gripping the edge of the sink behind him rigidly, time standing still as he looked down at Sanji's wide eyes staring back up him with innocent confusion. Swallowing thickly, he muttered in panicked explanation, “Cold.”

“Oh... Sorry.” Sanji chuckled nervously, rubbing his hands together before reaching out once more, “Cliche, right?”
Zoro just made a noise in confusion.

“Doctor.” Sanji stated lamely while holding up his hands with a shrug, “Cold hands.”

“Ah. Yeah...” Zoro coughed, allowing an embarrassed silence to stretch out between them as Sanji began inspecting the area again. Zoro eventually broke it by adding slyly, “You’re not really a doctor though, are you?”

“Pardon?” Sanji asked with a hint of indignation, gaze snapping up to Zoro.

Zoro mustered up the courage to look down at the blond with a smirk tugging at the corner of his lips, knowing full well the comment was completely underhanded and unwarranted, but unable to fully stop himself from riling up the blond like he used to... Like from before he had realized he had feelings...

Sanji looked genuinely affronted for a moment, before a smile broke his face and, just like that, the tension that had been hanging between them the last couple days, shattered. Sanji fought to hold back a laugh as he reared back and kicked Zoro in the shin while snapping, “You ass!”

Zoro took the punishment, still chuckling to himself as Sanji too, eventually regained his composure, both of them much more relaxed as the blond returned to dealing with Zoro's injury. Using the medical kit Zoro had brought with him, Sanji spent the next few minutes removing the old stitches, and properly cleaning the festering wound.

Sanji paused to dig through the medical supplies, finding all the items he was looking for to begin stitching Zoro back together. Laying them out methodically as Zoro returned to inspecting his own wound, hand coming down to pick at a bit of the scab still hanging from around the edge, only to have his hand aggressively slapped away.

“I'm the medical professional.” Sanji snapped abruptly, his earlier flustered nature abated, now fully alert as he scowled up at Zoro, “Let me do my job.”

“Fine.” Zoro muttered, holding his hands up in surrender as he leaned back against the sink and let the other man have full access to the wound. Keeping his gaze tiredly off to the side, he tried to not think too hard about the man's caring hands as they moved across his skin; they were thoughts that were not his to have.

The next several minutes were torture as Sanji disinfected, stitched, and properly bandaged the wound, all the while Zoro attempted to think pure thoughts. Not wanting to cause anything to happen that would end up being on eye level with the blond. It would give away the fact that the man playing doctor on him was a situation that was proving to be far more intimate than he had been expecting it to be.

“You're no longer allowed to clean your wounds,” Sanji ordered with a huff, pulling back to inspect his handiwork before scowling up at Zoro, “You suck at it; from now on you let me do it.”

Zoro heavily debated refusing the blond’s order, not entirely up for having the blond place his hands all over Zoro's torso on a daily basis, but he couldn't find the strength in himself to say no. Even though it was something he could never have, it seemed like he just couldn't stop himself from torturing himself by accepting even the smallest amount of physical contact with the other man.

“Sure.” Zoro finally muttered noncommittally.

~X~
Popping open the trunk of the procured rental car, Johnny and Zoro looked down at the two large back-country backpacks stuffed inside; each appropriately packed and well worn. Some other gear and travelling mementos were also jammed in, making it seem totally innocuous to anyone that might look in or even inspect it.

“Looks good.” Zoro noted, “What's in the bags?”

“Clothes, sleeping bags, other travelling gear - in case you get searched.” Johnny shrugged, “Plus, might come in handy.”

“I'm hoping we don't have to go anywhere remote.” Zoro noted blandly, “So where's everything else?”

Excitement lit up Johnny's face as he reached into the back and pulled out the two backpacks, and set them aside. Clearing away some of the other gear until the bed of the trunk was uncovered, he turned with an eager grin towards Zoro, “Push combination lock.”

Reaching to the left, Johnny pressed down twice in the bottom corner, once near the lock in front of himself, and a final three on the top right corner until there was a click. The bottom popping up slightly, allowing him to hook his fingers under it and flip it up, revealing everything else that was stored underneath.

A mass of firearms in all shapes and sizes were organized neatly in their separate slots along the underside of the lid with boxes of ammo tucked neatly below. Several knives and other weapons adorned the remaining portion of the available space, and the rest of the storage unit was filled with tactical gear and several unmarked bags.

Letting out a low whistle of appraisal, Zoro muttered, “Not bad.”

“That's high praise coming from you.” Johnny snarked back playfully, shutting the lid firmly and replacing the bags back on top. Taking the time to make sure everything fit properly, he then shut the trunk with a firm jerk and began a final walk around of the vehicle to make sure everything else was in order.

“How'd everything else go?” Zoro inquired as Johnny threw open the passenger door.

“Documents are all ready to go, inside.” Johnny explained as he rooted through the glove box before shutting it and poking his head above the roof of the car, “Insurance and license are in the glove box. Your extras are already packed, and I threw in a few plates for when you get to Shanghai.”

“You're a life saver, John.”

Closing the passenger door with a flick and waving his hand airily, Johnny walked back around to where Zoro stood, “It's what I do.”

A smile touched the corner of Zoro's lips as he turned and began making his way inside, movement a little stiff from the wound in his side. Though he had to admit that - predictably - Sanji had done a fantastic job and it felt far less inflamed than when Zoro had done it.

“Listen...” Johnny began nervously as he followed after Zoro's retreating figure, “You're not really thinking of going to her, are you?”

Zoro remained silent for several moments, recounting some of the conversation they had had last night after Sanji had left. He knew neither of them were on board with the idea, but they also understood that Zoro didn't have a lot of time to sit around and wait for more people to show up after
his head, “It might be my only option.”

“She'll kill you.” Johnny argued, before amending politely, “Or at least try.”

“The sooner I get this figured out, the better.” Zoro muttered as they ducked back inside the building through the door leading out to the back alley, “We have to head West anyway, it doesn't hurt to stop by; if anyone has heard whispers about this, it'll be her.”

“I don't like it.” Johnny singsonged unpleasantly as they entered the kitchen, conversation dropping immediately as they came upon Yosaku flipping through the rest of the documents they had assembled last night. Sanji was leaning over the table while brandishing a passport, looking thoroughly disgruntled.

“Steve[1]?” Sanji huffed pragmatically, “In what universe am I a Steve?”

Yosaku was clearly fighting a smile as he offered a shrug, both of them looking up as the door shut behind the two new arrivals. Sanji spotted Zoro and immediately straightened.

“Oi, Mosshead.” Sanji barked, both of them ignoring the snickers from the other two men. Zoro swiftly sent them a pointed look as their laughter was a bit too indicative of what they had discussed the other night. Sanji stormed up to Zoro while brandishing his fake passport, “What name did you get?”

Pulling the passport Johnny had given him earlier from his pocket, Zoro flipped it open and turned it towards the blond who took several moments to read it before shouting.

“Francois[2]??!” Sanji shrieked indignantly, rounding on the two men near the kitchen table watching the exchange with matching grins, “Are you kidding me? If anyone here is a Francois, it's me! I was practically raised on wine and cheese.”

“Hey. Hey.” Johnny waved the blond down, “It's always been his alias. We just picked Steve for you cause it's as generic as possible.”

“Oh boy.” Sanji drawled with facetious excitement, pocketing the document nonetheless.

“Ready to head out?” Yosaku asked, finally rising from the table and stuffing the last of the documents into a manila envelope and handing them off to Zoro.

“Unfortunately,” Zoro noted, hating to drop in on them so unexpectedly and then leaving just as soon. However, given how quickly they'd been tracked before, it was best they got moving now. “We've already stayed longer than I'm comfortable with.”

“Well, you have our number on your burner phone.” Johnny noted, “If you need anything else, let us know.”

“I will.” Zoro assured snagging the rucksack he had packed that morning and slinging it over his shoulder, “Thanks for everything.”

“Hey, make sure to come for a visit when you get all this sorted.” Yosaku added as the four of them headed back out towards the alley, Sanji still muttering to himself. “We can go do something without worrying about you getting shot at.”

“I'd like that.” Zoro murmured with a fond chuckle, turning to give each of them a firm handshake and a grateful nod, “Thanks again.”
He headed towards the car and Sanji gave his own farewell before falling in step behind him. Zoro took a moment to throw some extra things into the hidden compartment in the trunk before locking it securely and rounding the vehicle to make his way to the driver's side.

“Steve.” Sanji mumbled unpleasantly to himself, as though saying it more might make him dislike it less, nose scrunched up as he made his way to the other side of the car, “Steve.”

Johnny and Yosaku bid them farewell from the back door as Zoro tossed his pack into the backseat before opening the driver side door, giving a short wave back at the two who seemed far too choked up at his leaving than they should have been.

“See ya, Zoro!” Johnny called out.

“You too, Steve!” Yosaku added.

Sanji’s cheerful wave turned disgruntled as both men burst out laughing and the paramedic turned to look back at Zoro with a childish pout creasing his face, gaze turning accusatory before demanding as though it were Zoro's fault, “Steve?”

With a roll of his eyes he muttered slyly, “Get in the car, Steve.”

~X~

The car ride down to Osaka was relatively short and it wasn’t long before they were through security – passports posing no issue – and on the ferry heading across the East China Sea towards Shanghai. A two day boat ride had Zoro getting them a room on board as he wasn’t in the mood of sleeping in the car, given his injury, and it seemed the courteous thing to do for Sanji.

After a quiet dinner with muted conversation, Sanji abruptly pushed himself from his seat with his cleared tray and dealt with his dishes before returning to the table. Zoro was still poking at his food with a spoiled appetite as he found the fork freezing in place amongst some noodles as Sanji bent down a little too close to him to speak.

“I'm going to go out for a smoke.” Sanji offered as he twiddled a cigarette between his fingers, “Do I need an escort?”

Zoro contemplated it for a moment, not liking the idea of giving someone the chance of getting at Sanji just because he dropped his guard, but also very much aware that Sanji was likely going stir crazy with Zoro constantly hovering. Not to mention, he knew Sanji's smoke breaks were times that he really loved to spend alone.

Shaking his head carefully Zoro reasoned, “It should be fine. Just stick to the decks that have other passengers.”

“Gotcha.” Sanji grinned with a grateful nod and Zoro watched him go with unease.

Poking at his meal for several more minutes, Zoro eventually gave up and threw out his remaining meal before debating going back to his room. As much as he found being alone with Sanji a million times harder than with other company, he knew he couldn't leave the blond be for too long. Heaving a dramatic sigh and rubbing at his eyes tiredly he headed out to search the decks for the man.

It took a little searching until Zoro eventually found the blond out on the deck, leaning against the railing and watching the distant sunset with a peaceful look on his face. Sun danced across his hair, much in the same way it had when Zoro had first realized how he felt about Sanji; this time left him feeling just as breathless.
Coming up to stand next to the blond, he remained silent, unsure if he could say anything without fumbling over his words in that moment, palms sweaty on the cold steel railing as the cool sea breeze did nothing to help the clammy feeling he felt crawling over him. Every time he thought he had everything under control, he would catch Sanji with his guard down and the surge of emotions would overtake him all over again.

Fighting back the urge to fidget, he turned his gaze onto the horizon and the faint outline of the mainland just barely coming into view. Sanji pulled out a fresh cigarette and lit it, turning away to properly shield the flame from the wind, before facing forward once more and commenting around a drag, “Kinda surreal, isn't it?”

“Hm?” Zoro intoned softly, chancing a glance at the blond and instantly regretting it. His insides twisted nervously and he had to grip the railing lest his sweaty palms slip free; nervously watching the way the wind whipped the man's hair to the side and revealed the entire profile of his face, even the curls that coiled behind his ears was blown away revealing the long line of his neck.

“Like...” Sanji mused with a soft smile, cigarette hovering over his lips as Zoro silently panicked over this foreign arousal pooling in his stomach, “if someone had told me I'd be on a ferry in Japan a couple days ago; well I'd have called them a shitty liar. But here I am, and it still doesn't feel like it's real.”

“I...” Zoro managed through a dry tongue, eyes pinned to the water surging below them as he forced out, “I'm sorry.”

“W-what are you talking about?” Sanji stuttered out in surprise.

“I just realized I never properly apologized for getting you into this mess.” Zoro concluded with contrite, “And I figured you'd deserve to know.”

Sanji nodded thoughtfully, a contemplative looking taking over his face, silently finishing the rest of his cigarette as the sun finally set. Eventually, the cigarette burned down to the butt and Sanji finally spoke, “You know I didn't mean it as a bad thing; this whole... thing.”

Zoro cautiously glanced at the blond, raising an eyebrow.

“I mean sure; my apartment got blown up, my friends think I'm either dead or missing, and there's currently people trying to kill us,” Sanji listed off, with far too congenial of a tone before shrugging, “But hey, when am I ever going to get the chance to do something like this again, huh?”

“I suppose...” Zoro rasped out on a chuckle.

“Might as well enjoy the ride.” Sanji surmised with a lighthearted smile, crushing out his finished cigarette and replacing it back in the packaging before straightening. Inclining his head towards the door, he asked, “Shall we change your bandages before turning in?”

Zoro nodded softly, turning to follow the blond, “How's your shoulder?”

“A little stiff, but nothing a few muscle relaxants can't fix.” Sanji dismissed while giving the previously injured shoulder a test roll and commenting absently, “You popped it back in, practically, perfect.”

The words had a smile touching Zoro's lips - which he was grateful Sanji couldn't see as he followed behind the blond. The smile only lasted so long before being replaced with a worried frown at the reminder of the danger they were both still in and his unsurety over it. He had no idea what he was up against, had no idea what was even going on, and worst of all, he had no idea if he could keep his
promise to keep Sanji safe...

~X~

“So what's the plan?” Sanji prodded a tad too eagerly as they unloaded a few bags from the car outside the hotel Zoro had pulled them into. Getting a couple things from the trunk as discreetly as possible, Zoro tucked them away in his pack before locking up and heading towards the main office.

“I'm going to leave you here while I go check in with an informant.” Zoro explained tersely, not wanting to go into too many details while they were out in the open, “I don't like it, but taking you along isn't the best idea.”

“Why not?” Sanji groused, actually sounding a little put out which made Zoro refrain from rounding on him with an incredulous expression, opting to roll his eyes heavily instead to try and release some of his credulity at Sanji's excited behaviour.

“Let's just say that we aren't on the best of terms.” He tried phrasing it delicately as he held open the door for the blond.

Sanji walked through, giving Zoro a shrewd look, “What'd you do?”

“Why do you assume it was my fault?” Zoro snapped, stepping inside with the door falling shut behind as he caught up with the blond, an indignant scowl on his face. The receptionist looked up with a bored expression before glancing back down at his computer, clearly disinterested in what they were talking about.

“Have you met you?” Sanji snipped with an eyebrow raised childishly.

“There was a disagreement and some backstabbing,” Zoro explained shortly as they neared the counter, “It was resolved, but they're still a little sore about it.”

“Huh,” Sanji huffed sarcastically, “imagine that.”

Zoro gifted Sanji with a final look, that promised the blond wouldn't get the last word before turning to the receptionist and booking themselves a room. Paying in cash to avoid a trail – even a credit card with a falsified identity made Zoro uneasy – they selected a room and were soon heading upstairs with keys in hand.

“Anyway,” Zoro muttered pointedly, continuing on from where they left off, “I'll leave you here with some protection as well as a few backup precautions. If anyone comes it'll give me more than enough time to get back here.”

“Alright...” Sanji hummed warily, clearly not entirely sold on Zoro's plan, but deciding on trusting him regardless. The elevator arrived on their floor as Sanji stepped out first and made his way down the hall ahead of him. Eventually finding their room, he fumbled with the key before managing to get it in.

With a click the door unlocked and Sanji pushed it open, revealing a dark room inside with the faintest of light filtering in through the curtains. They only had a moment before a figure was darting out of the room and Zoro had his heart jumping into his throat at the stupidity of having Sanji enter before him. Bag falling from his shoulder, Zoro barely got a step forward before Sanji was yelping in surprise.

In one fluid motion Sanji raised his arms defensively as his foot lashed out to hit the man directly in the middle of the chest. The stranger went flying back into the room to sprawl on the floor with a
pained groan as Zoro's bag hit the floor with a thud in the silence that followed what Sanji had just done.

Zoro slowly made his way over to the doorway, standing next to the panting blond, gazing down at the man laying on the floor, his prone figure making it clear he wasn't in any condition to spring back to his feet. Turning back to look at the - still indignant - blond glaring down at the man, he asked, “Did you just spartan kick him?”

Sanji looked at Zoro and gestured vaguely towards the man before rationalizing, “I didn't want to get stabbed.”

Zoro just stared at the blond for a long, perplexed moment before finally managing with a frown, trying his hardest not to sound condescending, “That logic makes no sense.”

“If I tried to punch him he might have pulled a knife on me,” Sanji reasoned with a scowl before gesturing aggressively at his feet, “Shoes are safe.”

Zoro opened his mouth to reply, but found nothing coming out in the wake of Sanji's odd reasoning. The initial shock wore off as well and Zoro suddenly found himself far more attracted to the blond than he currently should be - given the situation. In an attempt to gather control over himself, he turned his back on the blond that was stirring weird emotions and strode over to the attacker.

Dropping down into a crouch by the man still holding his chest, Zoro grunted, “Does it hurt?”

All he got in response was a wheeze as it appeared the man had also been winded.

“Good.”

~X~

“Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God.” Sanji repeated over and over from the passenger seat in a panic, face buried in his hands as he muttered, “I can't believe we have a kidnapped man in the trunk of our car. Oh my God.”

“Sure,” Zoro drawled, “and the dead guy wasn't a big deal?”

“The dead guy was dead!” Sanji rationalized with a bark, refusing to remove his hands from his face as he muttered morosely, “Plus, I'm pretty sure I was still in shock and suffering sleep-deprivation!”

“Well we couldn't kill him in the hotel room.” Zoro reasoned with a scowl, “I wanna sleep there and removing a dead guy is a lot harder than removing an alive one.”

“Oh my Goood.” Sanji grumbled, hands dragging down his face furiously, until they were clasped across his mouth in mild horror. He didn't look nearly as distraught as Zoro had expected, just exhausted and perhaps a little nauseous.

Letting Sanji continue with his internalized freak-out, Zoro drove them down to an abandoned industrial area and located an empty warehouse that appeared to be used for squatters. Cutting the engine, he left Sanji groaning in the front seat as he got out to take a look around to ensure they were completely alone. A lap of the building and the surrounding area turned up nothing and he was finally comfortable enough to return to the car and deal with the assailant hogtied in the back.

As Zoro opened the trunk and wrestled the distressed man out with a hand curled firmly in his hair, Sanji seemed to have calmed enough to get out of the vehicle as well. Grabbing the chair from the backseat that Zoro had swiped from their hotel and following after Zoro as he guided the blindfold
and gagged man into one of the decrepit buildings.

Strapping him down to the chair - none too gently - and leaving him positioned in the middle of the room so he couldn't cause any trouble before coming back out to the car. Trunk still open as Zoro reached in and popped the second one up, snagging one of the unmarked bags Johnny had provided.

“Please tell me this isn't a bag full of tools for torture...” Sanji groused.

“Wha- no!” Zoro balked, a little taken aback that that was what Sanji's mind immediately jumped to, slamming the trunk closed and locking it while staring at the blond incredulously, “Besides torture never works.”

“What?” Sanji frowned.

“Torture is made up for movies.” Zoro clarified, slinging the bag on his shoulder before gifting Sanji with a judgmental look, “It never works.”

“Well, that's ruined every movie for me.”

“Sorry.” Zoro shrugged lamely, offering as best an explanation as he could while they headed back inside, “If it’s a secret worth dying for, then he’ll die. If it’s not a matter of life and death then chances are he’ll give me the information. It’s that simple.”

“So what’s in the bag then?” Sanji asked speculatively, handling the situation far better than he had a while ago in the car.

“Money.”

“Money?” Sanji chirped, utterly perplexed.

“C’mon.” Zoro urged dismissively, dragging the warehouse door open once more and allowing Sanji to step inside before closing it behind them, making their way over to the man currently cowering nervously in his chair as he watched the two men approach.

Handing off the bag to Sanji, he stepped forward to eye the man critically, allowing him to squirm for a few minutes. There was something different about this guy compared to the other two, and a sense of nervousness that the other two didn’t have. The other tip off was that he hadn’t had a cyanide capsule hidden on him; his motives overall seemed less legitimate than the others.

“Who are you working for?” Zoro demanded darkly, arms coming up to cross over his chest aggressively, “And how’d your buddies find me?”

“Buddies?”

“The man that tracked me to my home, and the other who tailed me in Tokyo.” Zoro clarified, “Who are they working for?”

“L-l-look I ain't got no buddies.” The man pleaded earnestly, “I was sent after you by my boss; he didn’t tell me why!”

“What the hell are you doing here then?”

“Drug cartels, m-man.” He practically sobbed, “Look I don't know you or why they’re after you; I just did as I was told.”

Zoro watched the near sobbing man for far longer than was probably necessary, before slowly
uncrossing his arms and reveling in the way he flinched. Stalking forward, his smirk only grew as with each step, the man cringed further away, as far as his restraints would allow till Zoro stopped right in front of him.

Leaning down with a wicked smirk, he reached out as the man whimpered in terror. Zoro grabbed the gag and fixed it back in place then reached around behind to pull it nice and snug, leaving an arm on the man's shoulder as he whispered with a taunting grin into his ear so that only he could hear, “You're lucky I'm not doing as I'm told anymore.”

Pulling back and standing tall again, he had to admit it was gratifying to see tears in the man's eyes. Snagging the bag from Sanji's lax hands, he unzipped it to reveal the massive amount of cash within and waited until the man composed himself enough to see what Zoro was offering.

“Last chance if you do know anything.”

He shook his head furiously, making it clear that he knew nothing more, perhaps even more upset that he didn't after realizing what he was going to miss out on. Zoro sighed regretfully, doing up the bag and slinging it over his shoulder before levelling on the man with finality.

“No, I'm going to leave you here, and maybe in a day or two, someone will come find you.” Zoro stated with a monotonous drawl, “Or maybe not. Either way I don't care. But if I see your face again, I will kill you.”

Another whimper left the man as Zoro turned and stalked out of the warehouse, Sanji following along in stunned silence until they were outside and Zoro finished padlocking the doors. It was nearly the same look Sanji had on his face after the first time he had seen Zoro kill somebody and it made Zoro slightly ill, not liking such an unsettled look on the blond's face to be caused by him.

Stalking back to the car in stilted silence, he replaced everything in the trunk until his thoughts began to whirl over what to do next. Out in the dimly lit yard, they stood by the open trunk together; Sanji still watching him with a mixture of awe and terror, and Zoro beginning to realize that there was no way he could leave Sanji alone.

“So...” Sanji stalled hesitantly, clearly not up for talking about what just happened, “what's next?”

“I'm gonna have to take you with me.” Zoro muttered bitterly, not wanting to take Sanji into such a hostile situation but also far more wary about leaving Sanji alone. If that man had been able to find out their room in such a short period of time, then the chances of others finding it was even better. Leaving Sanji alone in the room was practically handing him to anyone that would love to use him as leverage.

“Don't sound so enthused.” Sanji rebuffed flatly, arms crossing over his chest as he watched Zoro. Running both hand through his hair in agitation, Zoro had to fight down a growl of frustration while tugging at the strands. Eventually dropping his hands to his sides, he looked up at Sanji regretfully, “It's not going to be safe.”

“So?” Sanji's shoulders shook with a laugh, unfolding his arms to raise them in a hopeless gesture, “Doesn't seem like anywhere is safe.”

“But...”

“But nothing.” Sanji cut him off quickly, “You promised you'd get me home; I'm holding you to that. Plus Johnny and Yosaku have me pretty convinced that there's no one else I'd rather hire to keep me safe.”
Zoro opened his mouth to protest, but found himself thrown by the unwitting compliment. Closing his mouth in defeat, he heaved a sigh and inclined his head before rooting around in one of the bags. Finding what he was looking for, he tossed the bagged suit in Sanji's direction which the blond caught with a look of surprise, glancing down at it before back up again, jaw slack as Zoro ordered, “Put that on.”

~X~

An opulent gate had Zoro pulling the car to a halt as they stared up at the large mansion nestled just beyond a sea of finely hedged bushes and old oak trees. Curling metal grates of stunning silver wove their way out of the intricate brickwork of the two large pillars that bordered it. Firmly shut to the public, Zoro had no other option that to roll down his window and face the fancy microphone installed into the masonry.

After a short pause, an authoritative voice demanded, “Who is speaking?”

“Zoro Roronoa.” Zoro stated succinctly.

“A moment.” The haughty voice responded, connection cutting short as they sat silently for several moments before the voice returned, “You may enter.”

With a loud whirring, the gates swung back, allowing Zoro to drive up the expansive driveway, taking a spot near the entrance of the mansion since he wanted a quick getaway if things went south. Leading Sanji up the front steps he fiddled with one of the shirt cuffs, hating the way they always felt like they were chafing. They barely landed on the top step before the front door was swinging forward dramatically to reveal a finely dressed butler.

“Master Roronoa, I presume?” The woman inclined her head politely as she waited for Zoro's nod before noting, “I have been told a weapon's check is mandatory.”

“Fair enough.” Zoro grunted, raising his arms lazily as the woman stepped forward and began patting him down. He had known from the beginning that bringing anything along to see her would be useless, however it hadn't stopped him from wanting to at least put Sanji in a bulletproof vest. It seemed he was going to have to be on his best behaviour, and also be very weary of what he said.

Finishing with Zoro, the woman moved on to Sanji to pat him down as Zoro corrected his suit jacket with a jerk and redid the second button that had been undone. The butler finished searching Sanji just as quickly, the blond taking the time to correct his rumpled jacket as well before both of them looked back at the woman.

Seeming appeased, she gestured inside with a polite murmur, “Please, follow me.”

Following the woman inside the luxurious mansion, they made their way down a long entrance hall littered with expensive works of art and massive marble sculptures. Plush velvet rug guided them deeper into the building as the distance noise of a banquet taking place could be heard, eventually passing by the large double doors propped open to the expansive ballroom housing what had to be at least a hundred guests.

They continued past it, up a grandiose staircase that lead to a second landing and shortly after that they arrived outside a large oak door. The butler proceeded to knock twice, announce herself, as well as whom she was with before awaiting for a response.

Zoro took the moment to glance at Sanji and found the man nervous, but nonetheless in awe of the place. He was unable to catch his gaze in time to try and tell him to stay calm, as a rich voice
responded and ordered them to enter. The servant opened the door and allowed them to step inside before closing it shut with a heavy thud.

Upon entering the splendid room, Zoro found the woman he had not seen in nearly five years lounging comfortably in a large chaise by the fireplace. Red evening gown flowing off her elegant frame, the fabric illuminated by the flames flickering beside her and casting a shadow across her stern, yet gorgeous face. A glass of wine darker than her dress was poised in her hand as she watched the two men enter with a sharp gaze.

With a beckon, Zoro strode forward before coming to a polite stop several feet away from where she sat. A large fur rug separated them, the only light in the large den was that of the fire. Dark earthy tones, and rich woods kept the room shrouded in darkness and gave the entire place a much more hostile aura as he waited for the woman to eventually speak.

Taking a long, slow sip from her drink, she eventually lowered it and began swirling her glass as she murmured softly, “Roronoa.”

“So you know me?” Zoro grunted as politely as he could manage, inclining his head in a short, stiff nod. Not wanting to take his eyes off her for a moment, especially not eager to give her a courteous bow after the scar she had given him on his upper thigh.

“Who's your little friend?” Boa noted with a snake-like grin, eyes drifting to Sanji who was currently staring at the woman with a blatant concoction of confused emotions. The most obvious of which was attraction, judging by the stupid look he had on his face, only slightly askew due to his clear nervousness.

Zoro had to refrain himself from rolling his eyes at the flirtatious man, “Ste--”

“Real name.” Boa corrected swiftly, waving an elegant hand as she shook her head, “Not that silly fake one you gave to border control.”

Fighting a grimace, Zoro knew he should have expected as much from her before replying, “Sanji.”

With a pleased nod, she turned her attention back to Zoro as it was clear that she didn't care and only did that to try and throw Zoro off as well as remind him of her influence. Setting her wine aside, the glass clinking sharply on the table beside her, she spoke, “If you're here then I can only assume it's because you want to know why so many people are after your head.”

“Correct.” Zoro affirmed, not at all surprised with her knowledgeable guess.

Instead of responding right away, she remained sitting comfortably in her chair and watched Zoro with calculating eyes. He couldn't fathom to guess the thoughts swirling through her mind, but he knew without a doubt that he wouldn't be leaving without offering something in exchange for the information she had.

“What do you want?” Zoro scowled, “I'll pay anything.”

“Please, Roronoa.” Boa scoffed sardonically, “You should know that in our line of work dealing in money is only for the babbo[3]... I want something far more valuable.”

Trepidation was already filling Zoro upon the woman's request, knowing that nothing good could come out of anything she might desire. Forcing himself to remain as amiable as possible, he responded, “What?”

“Information.” Boa purred the word slowly and seductively, rolling each syllable off her tongue as
though whispering something naughty. Eyes burning with fiery excitement, she refused to break her gaze away from the defiant man standing before her.

“T’ve been out of the game for years.” Zoro countered, knowing that she would pull something sneaky like this. And while he was certain that she wouldn’t ask unless she was absolutely certain that he knew something she wanted, he would play ignorant for as long as he could, “I don’t know much anymore.”

“Oh, you’ll find that you do.” Boa crooned eagerly, finely manicured hand poised beside her elegantly as she stared down her nose at Zoro, “You’re actually the one person that has the answer to the question I’ve been so desperate to know for years.”

“Fine.” Zoro snapped, not in the mood to be playing her games. To her, he was just a mouse that she enjoyed taunting before devouring whole, and he intended to be long gone before she had the chance to follow through, “What do you want to know?”

“Everyone knows the story of the great Zoro Roronoa; The Bounty Hunter, Demon of the East – odd since you’ve been the lap dog of that joke of a western intelligence agency...” Boa trailed off as she seemed to be mulling over her own words before casting a shrewd glance back at Zoro and hissing almost menacingly, “Asura.”

While Zoro didn’t outwardly react, he found himself flinching internally at the mention of a name that he hadn’t heard in nearly three years. Vivid memories attached to it, the ones that he had attempted to forget for the sake of his own sanity, flashed before his eyes. Steeling himself against the recollections, he questioned indignantly, “What story?”

“The love story and untimely end of the feared operative.” Boa mused with a smirk, “Met a beautiful woman who melted his ice cold heart, fell in love and got married, and then moved to some rural – podunk – farm to live happily ever after.”

“Podunk?”

Zoro could hear Sanji softly mutter the word indignantly under his breath and had to refrain from turning on the blond and telling him to shush. Forcing himself to keep his gaze level with Boa as she readjusted herself in her seat, crossing her legs once more, and stared down at Zoro.

“There's only one thing wrong with that story...” Boa's gaze turned dark and she whispered through tight lips, “You don't have a heart to melt.”

Zoro remained silent.

There was nothing to say, and anything he did wouldn’t change what she was clearly implying. Though he would admit that current events involving the man to his right would definitely bring that statement up for debate. If this was what emotional vulnerability was, then he had definitely never felt it for Kalifa. However, Boa didn’t know that and it would be best to keep it that way.

Staying as impassive as he could, Zoro grumbled lazily, “You're an idiot if you think you know me that well.”

“And you're ignorant if you think you can trick me with such an obvious lie.” Boa sneered, “If you're here for what I think you are; then I'm curious as to where your supposed wife is. And who this strange man is.”

Unconsciously, Zoro felt his hand retract into a fist as he should have known someone as intelligent as her wouldn’t let something so obvious slip by her, and there was definitely no way he could lie
himself out of this situation. Sliding minutely in front of the blond, he muttered darkly, “What is your question?”

“Oh!” Boa intoned with genuine shock, eyes halting their flitting to level on Zoro with glee, “My, my, Roronoa. Aren't you giving me a fair bit more information than you ever intended; this is absolutely juicy.”

“What. Is The Question?!”

“Fine.” She huffed dramatically, tossing a few stray strands of hair over her shoulder, “What I want to know is the answer that everyone's been wondering since you retired; the real reason you retired.”

“You clearly have your own assumptions beyond what you've heard.” Zoro scowled, growing uneasy with the way her gaze kept slowly straying towards Sanji before snapping back to him. He wasn’t certain what she was up to, but it couldn’t be good, “What difference will my word make?”

“Darling, you're so naive.” Boa chuckled, “Half the fun is getting you to admit it.”

Zoro felt his resolve slowly breaking – finding it harder and harder to meet her gaze – the truth of the matter weighing on him far heavier than it ought to. But it had taken him months to admit it to himself, let alone his therapist. Being able to admit it to Sanji had been one of the hardest things he had had to do; and now he was just supposed to say it?

Why was it so hard?

“Is it true?” Boa continued with a gleeful smile, “Has the great Demon of the East lost his mind?”

“I don't know what you're talking about--” Zoro began softly. Hating how tiny his voice had gotten as he was being forced to admit his worst fears to the woman. Hating how easily she was managing to break his spirit over something he should have found laughably trivial.

“Don't lie.” She snapped lividly, icy stare matching his own wavering one. For the first time since they had entered her chambers she appeared genuinely angry, and Zoro could only meet her glare defiantly for so long. Regretfully, Zoro found his gaze breaking first as his eyes turned down in shame.

“Well, I would say you've given me far more information than you ever intended... So, I shall make good on my bargain.” Boa bemused with a content smile, “There's a bounty on your head.”

That caught Zoro’s interest enough to regain some of his composure, “By who?”

“How should I know?” Boa simpered with a bored flick of her hair.

“Why didn't I hear about it?”

“Probably because it's being kept hush-hush.” Boa rolled her eyes, “If anyone still loyal to you found out about it then I'm sure your American comrades would throw a little fit; whoever wants you dead doesn't want the CIA interfering. Or it could be them; who knows? All I know is it's been fun hearing about your new escapades and I'm sure it'll only get more so.”

“Anything else?” Zoro attempted lamely, wanting to end the affair as soon as possible.

“I know MOSSAD is still sore about the whole Alabasta incident you pulled several years back; they've taken up the bounty request and intend to try and fulfill it.” Boa mused offhandedly, “I believe they're still sore about you killing their best agent.”
“That was seven years ago.”

“So?” Boa scoffed scornfully, “You may be retired, but this bounty puts you back in the game, whether you want it or not. The only reason no one came after you before is because they’d be stupid to even try. The price of this bounty however, has blinded even the most rational.”

Zoro bit back a scathing response as Boa began examining her nails.

“Anyway, apparently some operatives there have been in contact with the buyer.” She mused, giving them a final once over before lowering her hand, “That's the best lead I can give you.”

Swallowing past the dryness in his throat, Zoro gave a stiff nod and it took all of his restraint to stop himself from spitting out his curt reply.

“Thank you.” He managed, turning on his heel as he began to lead Sanji from the room, knowing that at least the humiliation was over and he could continue with this cursed manhunt.

“Uh, hold on, Roronoa?” Trepidation filled Zoro's next step, foot hitting the polish floor with a loud clack before pausing to glance over his shoulder. Boa was smirking at him from her throne, “Deal's over, but did you really think I'd let you leave after what you did to me?”

“I thought money didn't mean anything to you.” Zoro snidely reminded her of her previous statement.

“Three hundred twenty million of it, does.” Boa hummed as she rose elegantly to her feet, pistol drawn with inhuman speed to train directly on Zoro. Finger already resting on the trigger as she continued, “You really were a fool to come here unarmed.”

A split second decision had Zoro darting in front of Sanji at the same moment Boa decided to shift her aim onto the blond. Hooking his foot behind Sanji’s ankle with a swift jerk, and a violent elbow thrown into Sanji’s side sent him to the floor in the same second Hancock pulled the trigger.

A muffled bang echoed throughout the small room at the same moment something impacted Zoro's shoulder. A heavy sensation took over the limb as he darted towards the table set just off to the side of the rug. Kicking it up as hard as he could so that it went sailing at the woman, distracting her and giving him enough time to snag Sanji by the back of his collar and drag him to his feet before running towards the door.

It swung open with a ferocious shove, and Zoro was lucky to have it clip the butler waiting outside and send her sprawling as Zoro grabbed Sanji's hand and dragged him down the hallway they came from. A bullet whizzed by the both of them and shattered a vase as they rounded into the next hallway, and instead of attempting to make the sprint he tackled Sanji into the next room they encountered.

He glanced around the room in panic to find anything he could use to defend them from the crazed mafia boss coming to collect his bounty. A regal suit of armor was poised in the corner, and without thinking Zoro snagged the sword from its grasp and tested the edge to find it fairly sharp.

“What the hell are you gonna do with that?!?” Sanji screamed incredulously in a hushed voice, clearly not stoked with Zoro bringing a sword to a gunfight.

“I don’t know!” Zoro growled back in the same panicked tone. The clicking of heels interrupted them as Zoro grabbed Sanji by the tie and dragged him behind the sofa in the middle of the room. Backs up against it, Sanji clapsed a hand over his mouth to keep from giving their position away with his breathing as Zoro attempted to steel himself for what was to come.
Peeking the edge of the sword around the side of the large sofa, he angled the blade until he was able to get a clear view of the doorway. Keeping his eyes glued to it, he pulled out the car keys and handed them to Sanji, muttering softly out of the corner of his mouth, “When I go; you run to the car as fast as you can. Got it?”

Sanji didn’t say anything, but Zoro could see him nodding from out of his peripheral and went back to focusing on what was about to happen.

Adrenaline was coursing through him with an intensity that had his hands shaking – the wounds in his shoulder and side vague sensations compared to the rush currently burning him from the inside. Old anxiety threatened the edges of his mind, but for some reason, they were easy to drown out in replacement of the mantra of getting Sanji to safety.

No fear. No memory. No mental wall was going to stop him from getting Sanji out of here alive.

A movement flashed across the blade as Boa entered the room and Zoro sprung from behind the couch, sword in hand as he launched himself at the woman. Not entirely sure of his intentions but bringing the weapon down is swift arch with no regard for the repercussions.

There was a clang of metal on metal as Boa flipped the gun around at the last moment to catch the blade between the barrel and the trigger guard. Zoro kept the pressure on until he saw Sanji dart past him and he disarmed the gun in a swift motion, ducking under the high kick meant for his injured shoulder, and slammed the sword down into the floorboards, pinning her dress into the hardwood.

Without waiting for a response, he darted out of the room as fast as his injured body could carry him. Distantly hearing her enraged shrieks as he got turned around several times before jumping out a window into the garden and sprinting to the driveway visible beyond the hedges.

Darting past the stairs that Boa stood atop, remnants of her destroyed dress in her hand, screeching at him with murderous intent. Reaching the vehicle, he found Sanji already in the driver side with the car idling, and practically fell into the passenger’s seat. Keeping a hand pressed to his chest in a lame attempt to help staunch the bleeding as Zoro bellowed, “Drive!”

TBC…

[1] In an SBS Oda stated that Sanji’s character was based off of Steve Buscemi in “Reservoir Dogs”.

[2] Zoro’s character is named after the real life pirate Francois L’Olonnais.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
“Keep pressure on it!” Sanji reprimanded Zoro for the umpteenth time from the driver’s seat as he
expertly navigated their car through the downtown night time traffic. Far more people were out than to be expected, but it seemed Sanji’s time driving an ambulance had at least giving him a proclivity for dodging vehicles with imperceptible timing.

“I am!” A sharp turn had Zoro lurching in his seat with a groan of pain, hand readjusting itself as he attempted to apply even more pressure to the wound that had managed to drench his front in blood. Hissing in pain as the pressure against the expanded bullet in his shoulder was far from pleasant. Trying to mask his discomfort, he growled out, “Focus on driving, Curly.”

“No, you’re not!” Sanji snapped irritably as he took another aggressive turn, wanting to get Zoro back to the safety of the hotel as soon as possible. Casting an annoyed glance Zoro’s way, he yelled, “Your front wouldn’t be covered in blood if you were doing it properly!”

“Who’s been shot before?!” Zoro demanded breathlessly, the road ahead of them swimming in his vision as he fought to stay conscious. The blood loss was beginning to go to his head, and the only thing really helping to keep him present was the infuriating blond on his right who insisted on this petty banter.

“And who’s dealt with gunshot victims before?!” Sanji rebuked incredulously as Zoro attempted to add more pressure to the wound, only to concerningly find his arms feeling far too heavy. Soreness starting to fade in the wake of a numbness that was beginning to crawl up his legs, and tingling in the tips of his fingers. An old but familiar sensation. It explained the darkness fighting to take over his vision, and reluctantly had him nervously turning back to Sanji.

“You’re an idiot, you know that?” Sanji ranted with a frustrated shake of his head, keeping his eyes firmly on the road as he wove the car through traffic at near dangerous speeds, “Getting yourself shot like this. I can’t believe you would... I mean who does that...”

“Hey...” Zoro breathed out weakly, the word feeling like it slid out of his mouth with how heavy it had felt to pronounce. Blinking slowly, the street lights behind the blond shimmering and dancing in his fading vision as he murmured on an exhale, “Sa... ji?”

At the mention of his butchered name Sanji actually slowed the car enough to look up at Zoro with a surprised shout, “Wha-- Zoro!”

Judging from the blond’s panicked expression Zoro probably looked about as good as he felt. Slumping further over in his seat at the distant sensation of the car jolting to a stop; the pressure of unconsciousness weighing down on his body, darkness invading his vision at a concerning rate until all that remained was the hazy visage of Sanji looming over him.

“Zoro!” Sanji managed sternly, one hand gripping Zoro's shoulder as the other hand came up to turn Zoro's limp head towards him, “Zoro stay with me. C'mon.”

Blackness encroached further unto his limited vision and Sanji's words became muffled tones of panicked concern. Body getting increasingly heavier, he found himself unable to even lift a hand to weakly wave off Sanji's hand from where it gripped his shoulder uncomfortably. His last conscious sensation that of Sanji's palm on his face, cradling it gently, as smooth, muffled words followed him into unconsciousness.

~X~

Lifting his eyes open was almost an impossible challenge as his entire body felt heavy, the only part of him significantly less fatigued was his mind. It had been years since he had passed out due to blood loss, but the heavy sensation on his body was one he was well acquainted with. However, it
was quite obvious he had recovered remarkably since. Not only was he not dead, but the amount of cognitive function returning to him at this rate meant he must not have gotten hurt too bad. Or at least his recovery time hadn't suffered nearly as much as he had thought it might have over the past three years in retirement.

The hazy visage of a ceiling came into view as Zoro vaguely remembered passing out in the car with a distressed Sanji. Immediately feeling guilty over causing the blond to have to worry, and forcing himself to look around tiredly to ascertain that he was in fact back in the hotel they had been making for in the first place. Though how he was here and not completely dead thanks to blood loss was another mystery.

Keeping himself from moving too suddenly, he turned his head to the side where he found Sanji sitting beside him with his eyes shut and a worried expression creasing his brow. A movement lower down had Zoro's eyes falling to the man's right hand where it rested elevated on the arm of the chair, grasping a balled up sock, clenching and releasing it in a steady rhythm.

A frown grew on Zoro's own face as his confusion mounted before he finally noted the tubing sticking out of Sanji's wrist with bright garnet liquid suspended within. Following the trail of plastic out of the chair and up the bed until finally noticing the matching needle keeping the tubing embedded in the crook of his elbow[1]. It took several full seconds before he realized what Sanji was doing and nearly fell out of bed in his panicked rush to sit up.

Sanji's head shot up immediately at the tug on the tube, dropping the sock as soon as he noticed Zoro was awake. Keeping his arm steady, he lurched out of the chair in an attempt to push Zoro back onto the bed, “Hey, chill ou--”

“What are you doing?!” Zoro bellowed in horror, voice not coming out nearly as loud as he expected it to and his body not responding as vigorously as intended. Voice a harsh rasp as his attempt to jump out of bed was more of a pathetic writhe to sit up which gave Sanji more than enough time to launch at him.

“Relax!” Sanji ordered a little more firmly, placing his free hand on Zoro's good shoulder and shoving him back into the bed with a tad more force than Zoro had assumed the blond was capable of. “I'm a universal donor.”

There was a moment of struggling before the meaning of Sanji's words fully sunk in and he stopped attempting to fight the blond off and remove the tubing. Instead, just blinking up at the paramedic with a perplexed expression as the realization of what Sanji had done was beginning to sink in. Especially the notion that if he had passed out in the car and now he was here, then that meant Sanji had managed to lug his unconscious body here as well.

“You had severe blood loss.” Sanji pointed out a little irritably, though it seemed having to fight Zoro back into bed was the cause of his grumpiness, “And I figured we couldn't go to a hospital... given our situation.”

“You--” Zoro managed, sounding far too indignant despite his gratitude before muttering in awe, “Thank you...”

“Start with that next time.” Sanji groused with a wry smile, finally trusting Zoro enough to pull away and fall back into the chair beside the bed. Despite looking relieved, now that they were no longer fighting, Zoro could see the tension practically deflating from the blond's body as he sunk further into his chair in relief.

“You...” Zoro began again, softly, still a little in awe over what the blond had done. He watched as
Sanji rooted around in the medical kit and started pulling out some swabs and bandages, “you saved my life...”

“Don't sound so surprised.” Sanji chuckled far more weakly than he had probably intended, finger applying pressure to the wound with a swab as he carefully retracted the needle from his wrist. Pausing once it was removed to glance back up at Zoro with a dashing grin, “I am quite fond of you; can't have you dying on me yet.”

Zoro remained in stunned silence as Sanji finished cleaning his wrist and patching it with a bit of medical tape, before doing the same to Zoro. Retracting the tubing from his elbow and cleaning the area as best he could, despite the fact that nearly half of Zoro was covered in blood, thanks to the open wound he had sustained to the chest. As Sanji finished putting away the scattered medical supplies, Zoro finally had the chance to glance at the wound responsible for the whole mess.

Brows raising, he found the wound neatly sutured into a thin line with impeccable unison thread work. Fingers coming up to rub across the stitches as delicately as he could, Zoro still felt utterly flummoxed with all Sanji had managed to accomplish while he had been unconscious. This was the first time Zoro really got to see Sanji’s work - aside from his brief stint in the ambulance - and he had to admit he was incredibly impressed.

“I cleaned and sutured it, but I didn’t have time to go digging around.” Sanji explained from his awkwardly stiff position in the chair beside Zoro’s bed. His professionalism feeling out of place but clearly masking a much deeper set worry over what had previously occurred, “Not with the way you were doing...”

“I cleaned and sutured it, but I didn’t have time to go digging around.” Sanji explained from his awkwardly stiff position in the chair beside Zoro’s bed. His professionalism feeling out of place but clearly masking a much deeper set worry over what had previously occurred, “Not with the way you were doing...”

“Can you get it now?” Zoro asked bluntly, eyes still fixated on the stitches.

“It’s not really necessary.” Sanji tentatively pressed. Zoro’s hand fell away and eyes rose to meet Sanji’s gaze, “You’re more likely to die from blood loss or infection than from anything that bullet will do to you.”

It wasn’t that Zoro didn’t value Sanji’s medical knowledge - he knew for a fact that the blond was right - but he also had enough metal in him to know that the more he could get out now the better. Not to mention he was pretty sure a piece of his shirt had gotten lodged in there with the curled bits of the bullet.

“Either you can do it,” Zoro offered as sincerely as he could, given his current situation, “Or I will.”

A tight moue of disapproval pulled at Sanji’s lips as it was evident he was not impressed with Zoro’s stubborn behaviour at the moment, but his silence was even more telling. Eyes unwaveringly locked with Zoro’s - which Zoro only managed to maintain due to the delirium still hovering over him - until the blond finally conceded with an exasperated sigh, throwing his hands up in defeat.

Without a word - aside from some unimpressed grumbling - Sanji went about digging through the medical kit for everything he would need to not only prep the injury, but also remove the bullet and patch it closed again. It wasn’t long before everything was ready; all the tools disinfected, Zoro’s wound reopened, and a very unenthusiastic - yet angrily determined - blond leaning over Zoro.

They were both tensely silent as Zoro lay back down on the ruined bed, and Sanji took his place leaning over him working at getting the bits and fragments of broken bullet and pieces of cloth from the wound. He was barely halfway done and Zoro began to remember why he found other people operating on him much more tenuous.

“Stop moving!” Sanji snapped with a livid hiss, hands pulling away as he held up the pliers he had
just been using in one hand and the tongs in another. Zoro scowled up at him as a sheen of sweat had started to grow across his brow in his attempt to keep himself silent during all of Sanji’s prodding.

“It hurts!” Zoro seethed back, teeth gritted as he forced his head up off the pillow to glare daggers at the blond who claimed to know what he was doing. Wound flaring up but no longer leaking copious amounts of blood onto the white sheets, his hands fisted in the blankets under him to keep from clawing his palms.

“Well, it'll hurt less if you stop squirming!” Sanji growled, narrowing his eyes and brandishing the tongs at Zoro as though they were something far more threatening. Zoro stared back just as defiantly because he was seriously beginning to regret persuading the blond to remove the bullet.

“Let's shoot you and let me play operation on your chest.” Zoro snapped, laying back regardless as he allowed Sanji to once more near him, “See how you handle that!”

“By all means.” Sanji spat back in exasperation, adjusting his grip on the tools again and levelling Zoro with a sharp look, “If it'll stop your infernal bitching!”

“You kidding me?!” Zoro grunted sharply as Sanji was back over him, tongs sliding into the wound, the blond skillfully prying it open with one hand as the other adjusted the pliers in his right, “That's all you do.”

“You dragged me from rural East Blue County to a war zone.” Sanji snipped back, gaze turned to the wound as a steady hand guided the pliers to once more search for the bullet fragments, “I reserve the right.”

“Well, I reserve the right to tell you to shu – AH!” Zoro cut himself off with a pained wail as Sanji managed to close around the largest fragment of bullet and twist it free, the flesh entwined around it burning. Zoro gave a throaty moan, face contorting in pain as it took all his willpower to keep himself from moving as the next few seconds were crucial.

Both of Sanji's hands were incredibly steady as one kept the wound pried wide, and the other slowly retracted the piece of deformed metal until eventually pulling it free. Only then was Zoro able to relax enough to open his eyes to see the tongs held just above his skin with the bullet covered in his own crimson blood. Releasing a long and heady breath that transformed into a weak chuckle, Zoro noted, “So much for gentle.”

“Nice patients get gentle.” Sanji hummed, turning away to drop the bullet into a small dish to the side before glancing over his shoulder at Zoro with a smirk, “You deserve a swift kick to the ass.”

“You can just try it, you--” Zoro once more cut himself off with a pained wail as Sanji managed to close around the largest fragment of bullet and twist it free, the flesh entwined around it burning. Zoro gave a throaty moan, face contorting in pain as it took all his willpower to keep himself from moving as the next few seconds were crucial.

“Fuck.” Sanji breathed out once more in heavy exasperation, discarding the tools on the bedside table as he dragged the medical kit over, “Let me finish patching you up before you hemorrhage yourself to death.”

“I'll hemorrhage you to death you...” Zoro grunted back breathlessly,

“Okay, that doesn't even make sense.” Sanji rolled his eyes, gently cleaning the wound once again with alcohol swabs before pulling out a large hooked needle and some medical thread. Going through the motions as though he had done it a hundred times – which Zoro assumed he must have –
needle threaded easily before leaning over Zoro once more.

The first jab of the thread into the skin stung, but was soon washed away by the continuous throb from the wound itself as Zoro let his head fall back and relax for the first time in minutes. Idly noting the warm pressure from Sanji’s fingers as they pressed on the wound to pull the needle through, before retracting to knot the thread and then coming back down to repeat the process.

“It’s hard to believe you’ve been shot so many times,” Sanji mused as he continued to gently suture the wound, wiping away some of the blood that had begun to pool with an alcoholic swab before continuing, “You’re such a baby about it.”

“It’s been a while.” Zoro grunted softly, holding his breath as Sanji hooked the needle through his skin once more, able to sprawl a bit more comfortably on the bed now that he didn’t have a piece of metal embedded in his collar bone. Suit jacket long since discarded, and the shredded remnants of yet another blood stained shirt hung off his limp frame, “Plus, I usually do it myself.”

“Are you saying I do shoddy work?” Sanji raised a brow, feigning offence, however the small smile at the corner of his mouth gave it away. Zoro forcefully shifted his gaze back to the ceiling, not needing to get caught up in looking at the other man more than he should.

“No,” Zoro admitted softly, knowing that despite how much he had previously complained, Sanji had removed the bullet faster than Zoro ever had. Half of his bullet scars were a hacked mess because it took so long for him to dig around to get it out, “Just, it’s easier to work on yourself.”

“It does explain the scarring.” Sanji muttered slyly under his breath.

“How?” Zoro prodded, hearing him just fine but wanting to prompt the man regardless.

“You heard me.” The paramedic groused.

Zoro allowed a soft snicker to wheeze out of him painfully as Sanji continued to suture the wound with steady, dexterous hands. Their bickering finally ceasing as Sanji put the finishing touches on the stitches he was forced to redo, hand jerking up near his head with a final flourish as he completed the last knot. Cutting the thread, disinfecting the area for the dozenth time, and then finally pushed himself away with a sigh of relief.

“Can I get up now?” Zoro groused, wincing a little as the question came out a tad harsher than he had intended. Attempting to pass it off as grimace of pain instead, he moved to swing his legs over the side of the bed and hopefully get out of the puddle of his blood he was still lying in. “We need to get out of here.”

“Absolutely not.” Sanji snarled, moving again to bracket Zoro against the bed to keep him from fully pushing himself to his feet. “You have an exposed hip and a hole the size of a quarter in your shoulder – not to mention severe blood loss – you need to rest.”

“We’re gonna get tracked here.” Zoro argued seriously, finding the blond’s concern terribly endearing and also incredibly inconveniencing given how much time they had already wasted. Judging from the time on the small digital clock perched on the night stand, he had already been unconscious for close to three hours. “We’ve already wasted enough time.”

“Well…” Sanji floundered with a disgruntled shrug, heaving an unhappy sigh, “How long do we still have?”

“Eight.” Zoro estimated, shaking his head disapprovingly as he weighed his options. Given what had happened with Boa and the trail that had been on them in Japan, it wouldn’t be long until operatives
would be sweeping Shanghai for any noticeable video footage of them. “Maybe ten hours.”

“Fine.” Sanji accepted immediately, “Give yourself that much.”

Zoro shook his head firmly, “Each hour we lose is dangerous.”

“And you not allowing yourself to heal is dangerous!” Sanji rebuffed irritably, throwing his hands up to cover his face in obvious distress as he bemoaned to himself, “If Chopper knew what I was letting you do he’d have an aneurysm.”

“Well, Chopper’s not here.” Zoro murmured softly, voice growing gentle at the mention of the worrisome young doctor, finally able to push himself to his feet and stand level with the blond without getting pushed back down, “Now can we get a move on?”

Sanji’s index finger jerked aside to reveal his right eye as he glared Zoro down for several moments before allowing his hands to drop with a defeated sigh. Dried, bloodied hands fell to his hips, lips forming a thin line as he demanded sharply, “Six hours and you sleep through all of them.”

Glaring hard, Zoro countered, “Four. And we get everything packed and ready.”

“Five.” Sanji rebuked, “You shower and sleep. I pack.”

Zoro’s mouth remained in a petulantly thin line for several seconds as he glared down the fiery blond who refused to back down. Glowering just as defiantly at Zoro with not an iota of fear in his eyes as Zoro began to realize that when it came to Sanji he was probably always going to falter. He looked away first with a hiss, “Fine.”

Ignoring Sanji’s jubilant grin, Zoro stalked off to the bathroom to wash himself of all the blood currently on him while Sanji began dealing with the bloody mess Zoro had made. Feeling guilty about letting Sanji deal with it, but he also had the suspicion that if he attempted to help, Sanji would drag him off by his ear and make him sit in the corner. So instead, he followed the grouchy blond’s instructions, undressed, and got in the shower.

Standing under the poorly regulated spray of the shower, he kept his head dipped to keep the water from aggravating his wounds as his mind whirred with the events of that evening. Miraculously more stunned by Sanji’s abilities than he was over the fact that Boa had nearly taken his head off for his bounty. They had a rough past, but he had never thought she would so blatantly attempt to actually end his life.

Prick on his left arm throbbing slightly, Zoro’s thoughts were once more brought back to himself and what had just happened. Raising his arm up, he blearily stared at it through the dim lighting afforded to him by the bathroom light shining through the curtain. Aging skin pockmarked and scarred - riddled with lacerations and old wounds – the palm of his hand a dry, calloused mess of weathered lines and cracks. The appendage rugged and withered from the abuse he had put it through. And through it all a small dot of red sat in the crook of his elbow, itching far worse than the bullet wound to his shoulder.

Other hand coming up with tentative fingers, he gently pressed into the mark to relieve some of the aching and attempt to rub out an even deeper ache that was far more than the skin deep. Fingers pressed in until he could feel the corded tendons, giving a sharp press before pulling back with a final scratch at the dot that was probably going to become his most haunting scar yet.

Arm falling heavily to his side once more, he tried to ignore the confusing concoction of feelings in his chest and instead focused on scrubbing the blood from his body. Trying to focus on the task at
hand and not the blond haired, blue eyed man in the next room - and his feelings for him that were making it increasingly harder for Zoro to forget.

~X~

Sitting bolt upright in bed with a howl of fear, Zoro jerked forward until he was curled into himself, his hands fisted in the sweat soaked sheets. Cold streams of stress slid down his face and dripped in the blankets pooled between his legs, the dark stains dancing in and out of focus as his eyes adjusted to the darkness surrounding him.

Laboured gasping finally dying down, he began to calm after the startling horror of a nightmare that was already fading from his memory. Old visions and distant incidents that had happened long ago but still tormented him and haunted him despite being able to fully understand why they did.

“Ugh...” Zoro bemoaned wearily, hand braced against his brow in exhausted frustration before sliding it down his face in an attempt to swipe some of the sweat away. Hand dropping back to the blankets, he pulled them aside as he slid out of bed and trekked his way silently across the room.

Getting the balcony door open as quietly as he could, Zoro stepped out onto the quaint veranda and shuffled over to the railing which he leaned against with a defeated groan. Old metal bit into his elbows as he stared down at the desolate street below and the reality of what had just transpired hit him fully.

It had been literally months since he had even had an inkling of a bad dream, and now he had just had a night terror so bad he was woken up screaming. There was no way he hadn't woken Sanji, and it was only through the blond’s polite discretion that he was not embarrassed more.

Keeping his anger in check was a struggle – the urge to throw the decorative table off the veranda was very strong – but he managed to remain calm as he tried to rationalize the situation. In all honestly this was how it had all begun the first time, and he had to wonder if due to the high-level stress of the situation, his PTSD was manifesting itself in the only way it could outside of Zoro’s consciousness.

They were incredibly lucky that up until this point, Zoro hadn't had a worse episode, but he had already deduced that Sanji was the reason for that. He loathed his nightmares, but if they were necessary to keep him levelheaded enough when he was awake then so be it--

A jarring noise of the rickety balcony door being opened had Zoro's shoulders tensing nervously as the sound of Sanji's bare feet on the deck announced the man's arrival. Giving Zoro a wide berth, Sanji shuffled over and leaned on the railing a couple feet away as he went about lighting a cigarette with casual indifference.

Zoro's agitation slowly waned as it seemed Sanji wasn't intending on speaking about what had occurred, but it didn't prevent the awkward silence from making Zoro feel foolish. The only reason Sanji was awake at all was because Zoro had woken him. Turning cautiously to fully look at the man for the first time since he had joined Zoro out in the cool night air, he found his shoulders finally sagging in reverent defeat.

Hair down in a sleep tousled mess, Sanji puffed on his smoke as the bangs messily curled over half his face and obstructed his view. Wispy tresses curling at the nape of his neck as he hunched over the railing with a tad of exhaustion apparent in his frame. Loose shirt hung from his lanky form, rustling in the night breeze as he kept his gaze turned towards the city horizon alight before them. Most of him was cast in shadow except for the few street lights that illuminated his hair a golden orange.
“It's beautiful...”

“Yea...” Zoro found himself breathing out in agreement before even realizing what Sanji was referring to. Eyes growing wide as he realized his folly and turned his gaze out towards the city and horizon that the blond was no doubt actually referring to. Cold sweat returning in an instant as his hands gripped the railing in front of him for dear life.

“I mean,” Sanji floundered, completely oblivious to Zoro's comment, “nothing will ever beat the countryside back home, but... there's something magical about twinkling city lights. A world that never sleeps...”

Hands and body now tense for an entirely different reason, Zoro's heart raced in relief that Sanji hadn't noticed him staring. Pointedly looking elsewhere when the blond turned to cast a sideways glance in his direction, Zoro blurted out somewhat awkwardly, “Sorry for waking you.”

“Eh,” Sanji raised a shoulder in a half-hearted shrug, limp wrist raising to lazily bring the cigarette back to his mouth for another thoughtful puff, “Wasn't sleeping that well anyway.”

Zoro firmly remained silent in his regret.

“Besides,” Sanji continued airily, waving a dismissive hand towards Zoro, “you held up your end of the bargain and at least got some sleep.”

Zoro wasn't entirely sure if this was Sanji's polite way of saying thank you for at least trying to get some rest, or if he was implying they were allowed to leave now. Biting his lip before broaching tentatively, “You tired?”

Sanji shook his head, “Not really.”

“We should leave.” Zoro concluded firmly, waiting silently on Sanji's consent.

“Okay...” Sanji agreed tentatively, stubbing out his cigarette, “What's next?”

“I need to find who set the bounty.” Zoro explained as he began carefully making his way back inside the hotel room. Sanji following after disposing of his smoke in the tray on the table outside. Having slept in his clothes, all Zoro had to do was grab his boots and jacket while continuing, “I have a buddy in India that'll be able to help.”

“India?” Sanji questioned, not nearly as surprised as he had been the last time Zoro had announced he was dragging them halfway across the world. Following Zoro's lead, he pulled on his shoes as well, while the other man finished lashing his laces and stood, slinging his bag over his good shoulder.

“It's about a four day drive,” Zoro estimated, “But given my condition we'll need to stop for the nights so about a week.”

Zoro reached for the car keys but Sanji snagged them out from under his outstretched hand in the last moment. Flicking them up and into his hand protectively, he grinned cheekily, “I'm driving.”

Zoro's mouth opened on instinct to complain, but he very quickly realized that when it came to his health, it seemed like Sanji was going to be an absolute pain in his ass. Closing his mouth and stifling his complaints, he accepted his lot with quiet dignity and a nod of agreement before following Sanji outside to the car.

~X~
The first couple days of their driving went by as uninterrupted as Zoro had expected they would, after having lost any trail that might have started back in Japan. Miles were put between them and the coast they left behind, cities and towns blending into each other as they drove for as long as they could before finding somewhere to rest. Civilization became more distant as the highway turned gorgeously scenic and for a while, it was almost easy to forget why they were there in the first place.

The road took them through mountainous valleys, weaving through heavy forests sunken between towering cliffs, and across flat plains of endless sky with rolling black clouds in the distant horizon. There were stretches of road seemingly in the middle of nowhere, without a hint of civilization until they would finally emerge from a thick forest and head out into a broad valley.

However, returning night terrors kept Zoro – and subsequently Sanji – sensibly aware that things were not okay. And on the fourth day, it became apparent that outside of the larger cities, it was far easier to be tracked, and that news of his bounty had no doubt travelled quick. He was woken from his nap by a nervous blond as the first sign of trouble in days finally presented itself.

“Hey...” Sanji murmured softly as his hand shook Zoro's uninjured shoulder to gently wake him while keeping his other on the wheel, “Mosshead.”

“Hm?” Zoro grumbled tiredly, lifting his head from where it had been resting against the seat belt and ignored the teasing moniker. Rubbing the lethargy from his eyes, he turned on the man currently driving, brow raising in question while his eyes still remained nearly crinkled shut in the midday light.

“I might be paranoid,” Sanji noted, “but this car has been following us for a while.”

Without moving much, Zoro carefully glanced in the sidecar mirror and watched the silver car that followed them in the distance; two heads visible within but otherwise too far away to note any discerning features. It was obviously a rental car, however considering the usual heavily packed tourists that frequented the scenic part of this highway the vehicle seemed suspiciously empty...

“Oh my God, did you go back to sleep?” Sanji grumbled indignantly.

“When did you notice them?” Zoro murmured, ignoring Sanji's question entirely as he continued to keep his eyes on the car. The consistent distance it maintained behind them was a little odd, especially if they had been following them for long enough to arise Sanji's suspicion. It seemed appropriate that they would only be able to remained untracked for so long before someone recognized him.

“Uh, a while back.” Sanji mused, “Can't remember the town.”

“Have they been maintaining the same distance?”

“Yeah,” Sanji muttered warily, obviously coming to the same conclusion Zoro had as he adjusted his grip on the wheel nervously, “At one point I thought they might want to pass so I slowed down but they didn't. Seemed weird.”

“Pull in to the next gas station.” Zoro ordered calmly, turning his head back to staring out the front window. Sitting a tad more up right, “Stay calm and act like you don’t notice them.”

It wasn't long before they were nearing a small outpost that clearly stood as a marker for the outskirts of the city beyond. It was more of a junkyard than a gas station as the building nestled behind it was overflowing with old cars and various miscellaneous pieces of junk and rubbish. Gas prices were listed on a decrepit sign rising out of the top of the weathered overhang, the pumps inside rusted and
dent from years of neglect and misuse.

“This one looks kinda deserted...” Sanji noted nervously, “You sure?”

“Even better.”

“What...” Sanji paused momentarily before continuing, “what are you gonna do?”

“Just a friendly chat.”

“See... I know you're lying but I'm not sure I want the truth...” Sanji jibed playfully before asking seriously, “Is it going to be dangerous?”

“Probably.”

As Sanji began slowing the vehicle down so he could prepare to make the turn off, he cast a sideways glance in Zoro's direction with an uncomfortable smile. Mouthing his words for several seconds before making the turn and asking while keeping his gaze set on the gas station, “You gonna be okay?”

Zoro immediately knew what Sanji was referring to, and instinctively he felt the need to be defensive about what the blond was implying. However he couldn't exactly fault the blond for worrying about the exact same thing Zoro had been stressing about since the moment he had been thrown back into his old life.

But everything else he had dealt with up to this point hadn't caused a relapse and as he looked down to his hands, he found them uncompromisingly steady. An unbelievable calm settling over him as he knew he was mere days from getting Sanji to safety and he wasn't about to trip at the finish line.

Hands closing into resolved fists, he looked up and confirmed confidently, “Yeah.”

Sanji didn't seem entirely convinced, but trusted Zoro's response nonetheless. He pulled up in front of a gas pump and cut the engine. Both of them remained in the car silently as their collective gaze turned to the road and watched as the car continued on its way down the highway without an inkling of intention to slow down.

“False alarm?” Sanji muttered quietly.

“Doubt it.” Zoro commented as he flung his door open, stiffly pushing himself out as he added, “They'll probably double back.”

Sanji got out as well, watching while Zoro rounded the car and began pulling some of the local currency from his pocket. Nearing the weary blond, Zoro could already hear the engine of a familiar car making its way back down the highway towards their location.

“Go inside and pay.” Zoro quietly explained to Sanji while handing him a few bills, “They're gonna follow me. Once they do; get back to the car, fill up the tank, and wait for me.”

“But...”

“Whatever happens. No matter what you hear,” Zoro kept his eyes locked with intent blue while he ordered sternly, “stay by the car.”

“Okay...” It was clear the blond wasn't ecstatic about the plan, but nodded nonetheless and took the money.
Remaining where he stood, Zoro watched as Sanji sidestepped around him and made his way inside just as the approaching engine slowed near the turn off. Zoro turned and made his way towards the marked bathroom off the side of the building, his back turned to the road, already hearing vehicle tires crunching over the gravel as it pulled to a stop.

Taking casually slow strides so that the arriving men would no doubt see where he was going, he rounded the corner and walked out of sight. Zoro didn't like splitting up from Sanji, but inside the gas station - where the owner was milling about - was where Sanji had the most likely chance of not getting hurt in this ordeal. Not to mention these didn't seem like particularly high end hit-men and they would probably immediately jump at the opportunity to literally catch Zoro with his pants down.

Pushing in the filthy door to the grungy bathroom, Zoro made his way over to the sink and took a moment to splash some questionably dirty water onto his heated face before glaring at his reflection. Steeling himself for what was about to happen, he met his own dark brown eyes for the first time in what felt like weeks and tried not to feel like it was a stranger staring back at him.

Giving an aggressive huff, he turned back to the still running faucet, cupping a handful of water and flicked it absently onto the floor by the bathroom door before turning the tap off and shaking his hands to dry them as best he could. Stalking over to the bathroom stall, he wrestled the heavy porcelain lid off the back tank of the toilet and hefted it in his hands to get a feel for the weight as he made his way back to the entry door.

Taking a firm grip on the large slab of ceramic, he turned and with his back to the tiled wall near the door. Listening intently, he could already hear hurried footsteps making their way over, and a distinct, hostile murmuring between whoever was approaching. Judging by the voices, it was both men from the car, which Zoro couldn't have planned better.

The door was pulled open aggressively as a man moved to step inside, Zoro darting his leg out to hook the top of his foot at the back of the man's heel and jerking him forward into an unexpectedly larger step. The man’s heel landed in the water Zoro had spilled on the tiles previously and lunged forward, head perfectly at hip level as Zoro turned into the falling man's momentum and slammed the toilet tank cover directly into his face.

Slumping to the wet and slimy floor, blood oozed from his face to mix with the grout between the tiles as Zoro launched at the other man frozen in the doorway with a gun extended in his hands. Ceramic lid coming up just as swiftly, Zoro slammed it into the man’s hands and knocked the gun clean out of his grasp. Following the motion with a quick lunge forward and the end of the slab slamming directly into the man's nose.

An audibly grotesque crunch had a gusher of blood spewing from the man's nose as he too fell to the ground. Zoro stood between the two beaten bodies while giving each a cursory glance to ascertain that they were indeed dead before dropping the lid carelessly onto the first man's limp corpse and stepping over the second to get out of the filthy bathroom.

Having barely broken a sweat, Zoro was happy to find that the ordeal had been much easier than he had anticipated. Rounding the corner back to the main fill up area, he found his heart jumping into his throat as he stumbled upon a scene he had not been expecting to find. Three more men and an entirely separate car were stationed out front, and had Sanji completely surrounded.

“I stayed by the car.” Sanji grinned proudly, though his smile was clearly strained due to the multiple guns pointed at him. Hands raised by his ears, he stared Zoro down with a far less panicked expression than Zoro would have expected from him.

Zoro continued to walk slowly towards the hostile situation the blond had found himself in, masking
his horror at not noticing or assuming the potential of a second car. It was sheer, dumb luck that they hadn't just shot Sanji on the spot and came racing in after him instead. It was uncertain how much intel these men had on him, and if they were as aware as the other attackers just how important Sanji was.

"Oi! Oi!" The man nearest him warned angrily, "Don't move."

A final step and Zoro came to a halt several feet away, watching the entire scene quietly as a million scenarios raced through his head and thousands of outcomes played out before his eyes. Focusing mainly on the ones that put Sanji's safety first. Meanwhile, the thug looked him up and down, noting the blood on him with a scowl.

"Go check on them!" The man barked angrily, looking sharply to the side to yell at one of the less confident men, before turning back to Zoro with a snarl, "And you; hands up."

With a scowl Zoro slowly brought his own arms up to mimic Sanji as he refused to break eye contact with the man clearly in charge. Jet black hair slicked back, a sleazy scowl on his rat face as the man rounded on Zoro, barrel of the gun trained to his skull, his buddy darting past Zoro to go check on what had happened to their accomplices.

"Don't move, Roronoa." The thug snarled.

Zoro kept his hands raised lazily as he glanced over at Sanji to find the blond watching him with a tense curiosity. Questioning blue eyes peered at him across the lot as the hot dry air whipped around them and stirred up swirling clouds of dust.

Keeping his posture as aloof as possible he slowly dropped his gaze to the undercarriage of the car before back up again, eyes widening a fraction as he pointedly watched the blond. Sanji watched Zoro stiffly, keeping his entire body from moving as his eyes shone with understanding and all he gave in recognition was the faintest of smiles quirking the corner of his lip up before becoming impassive once more.

Relieved that Sanji was clever enough to know what he needed him to do, Zoro slowly turned his gaze back to the man that still had the gun trained on him. There was always an ever present worry that his mind might start playing tricks on him in the middle of their fight, or worse he might collapse completely under the weight of a memory. However that was something he could not allow to happen, a single slip up could cost Sanji his life.

As the wind rustled past them a final time, Zoro took the reprieve to let out a long, calming breath as he began planning out the next several scenarios. Their numbers likely indicated that the thugs weren't extremely good at close combat, and if he timed it right, he should be able to disarm both men without any casualties. All he needed was a moment for the man nearest him to drop his guard...

Seconds ticked by until the moment presented itself when rat-face turned his beady, black eyes away for a moment to glance back at Sanji. Zoro didn't waste a moment as he launched himself at the man with the full intention of making both of them regret ever pointing a gun him.

Darting low, he lunged for the man and at the same time ducked behind the car so the other thug couldn't get a clean shot at him. In the same moment Sanji dropped to the ground and crawled under the car, his captor distracted by Zoro's actions. Hand expertly twisting the weapon from the man's grasp, his other lashed forward to strike the unsuspecting man directly on the throat. Zoro grinned as he realized this was going to be easier than he thought.

Tossing the gun aside, his hand slid up to grab the cuff of the man's long-sleeve and pulled forward
with a sudden jerk. Getting as much of the fabric free as possible, and trapping his hand inside, before stretching the fabric up and over the rat-faced assailant’s head.

Wrapping the shirt sleeve around the still recovering man's neck, Zoro dragged him along to confront the other attacker who had already fired two shots; one narrowly missing Zoro's leg judging by the reverberation he felt as he rounded the car and swung the man's friend in front of himself as a shield. A couple shots whizzed by them, one catching Zoro's human-shield in the leg, his yelp of pain muffled due to the shirt sleeve still around his throat, cutting off his air supply.

The man immediately ceased firing. Zoro took the opportunity and dropped the wounded man, stalking forward before the armed man even realized what was happening. A rather ugly fellow that began blubbering in rage as he realized what was happening, raising his gun once more now that his friend was no longer in the way.

Deflecting the weapon to the side, Zoro's hand lashed out, hit the release on the gun with practised ease causing the magazine to slip from the weapon. Using the man's surprise, he struck again and connected with his nose. The man stumbled backwards with a yelp of pain while Zoro could already hear the injured man behind him getting up and limping towards him.

Hooking his foot under the gas nozzle that Sanji had previously dropped, Zoro kicked it up, swiped it out of the air, and spun around to whap the man behind him directly on the nose with the blunt, metal side. Turning back to the second, a lethal kick aimed at Zoro's knee was quickly deflected with a bit of clever work from the gas line hose, hooking the man's heel and reefing up to send the ugly man sprawling onto his back before rat-face was back on him again.

This time, having to dodge multiple skillfully thrown punches from the rat-faced man who was clearly intent on incapacitating him. Finally managing to trap a wrist in the hose, Zoro slammed the man into the side of the car before whipping him towards his buddy who had managed to get back up. One stumbling to the ground as the other allowed his accomplice to fall as he launched himself at Zoro with an enraged scream.

Dodging a swipe meant for his throat, Zoro looped the hose around the back of the man's neck and jerked down as hard as he could. Bringing the man's face directly into his swiftly raised knee with a painful sounding crack that didn't knock him out but had him pulling away with a yell.

Wrapping the hose around the distracted attacker's neck, he kept it seized as tight as he could in an attempt to get him to pass out as the second man was back on him in an instant; bloodied but determined as he rushed Zoro while he was currently occupied. Leg snapping out to catch the man directly in the throat, the assailant fell to the ground by Zoro's feet while grasping his neck and wheezing painfully.

Keeping the hose pinched around rat-face man’s neck, Zoro dropped down to latch his hand around the ugly one’s throat as tight as possible. Tugging the nozzle down towards him, as far as it could reach with the other man still caught in the hose, who began to writh from the lack of air. Ignoring rat-face’s squirming, Zoro forced the nozzle into the ugly man's mouth before pressing the lever until thick gasoline came spewing out and filled his mouth, soaking his face.

Memories of drowning victims flashed across his vision, the blood rushing in his ears louder than the guzzling sound of fuel gurgling onto the ground. Zoro’s body was shaking nearly as badly as the two men he currently had entangled in the gas hose but his hands were steady with rage. Despite each horrible image he remembered, and every memory that threatened to make him disassociate; the image of Sanji surrounded by the three assailants was stronger.

Once the last of the twitching faded, Zoro finally released his hold on the men - who both fell to the
ground in limp, lifeless, heaps - and dropped the nozzle to the ground where it clanged against the asphalt. Hands sore from remaining tightened for so long, he slowly pushing himself to his feet and flexed them as he cast a glance around for the man that had just returned from checking on his friends.

The timid shuffle he made towards Zoro and his comrades made it clear just how shook up he was about the state he had found the other two in. And after seeing what Zoro had just done to his other friends he didn't look all too eager to be the last one standing.

Stalking around the car, Zoro idly reached out for a piece of piping leaning against one of the posts and made his way over with a dark glower. As he rounded the vehicle and headed towards the fifth and final man, he could already see from his trembling grip on his gun that he was no longer as confident as he had been when he arrived.

Getting close enough to see the whites of the man's eyes, Zoro side stepped a moment before the man's finger retracted fearfully on the trigger, gunshot cracking across the silent roadside as Zoro's steps never faltered. The ringing was sharp in his ears, but unaffected as he strode forward with livid purpose.

Ducking low, Zoro brought the pipe up in a swift arc that connected perfectly with the man's hand and sent his gun sailing into the air. Barely pausing before recovering his stance and bring the pipe around again to smash the man across the side of the head and sent him spinning to the ground with hardly a moan of pain before passing out cold. Blood pooled from his shattered jaw to soak into the golden earth below and stain it a dark black.

It was only in the sudden silence of the dusty, deserted gas station that Zoro could hear the heaving of his own exerted breaths. Sweat staining his brow as he slowly pivoted on his heel to ascertain that there was no one else around before dropping the blood splattered pipe to the ground at his feet and shuffling back to the car.

His footsteps faltered just at the edge of the shadow cast from the overhanging shelter of the gas station as he glanced up to find Sanji standing beside the car. Dirt muddled the front of his clothes from laying on the ground under the vehicle, but his hands remaining loosely at his sides as he looked at Zoro with nothing short of slack jawed exhilaration.

A grimace remained stuck on Zoro's face as he continued to pant lightly in his recovery, the pain from his wounds making itself known. He couldn't discern exactly what was going on from Sanji's expression, but he couldn't help to be relieved that the blond no longer looked at him in horror over the things he did.

Another gust of wind whipped through the lot, only this time the silence was much more tangible with the several bodies littered on the ground and the tension lingering between the two standing. The collar of his yellow button up whipped against his cheek as the unbuttoned front fluttered in the breeze. Wind eventually dying down, allowing his shirt settle onto his no longer heaving shoulders. Both Sanji and Zoro watched each other before the blond finally spoke up, “Holy shit...”

With a guilty wince Zoro slowly trudged forward until he was able to lean heavily on the car before sliding down to sit with his back resting against the vehicle. Keeping a hand pressed to his inflamed shoulder, Zoro muttered the only thing that came to his mind in that moment, “I tore my stitches.”

Sanji stood eerily silent for a moment before breaking out into hysterical, raucous laughter, sliding down the car to take a seat adjacent Zoro while tears blossomed in the corners of his eyes. Holding his sides while Zoro watched incredulously as the blond nearly laughed himself into a stupor, only managing to compose himself nearly a minute later when the cackles finally began to cease. Head
leaning back against the car as he stared up at the canopy of the gas station, he heaved a sigh of relief before his head dropped to the side. Wide smile still showing a dazzling grin as Sanji remarked, “You’re fucking insane…”

TBC…

Chapter End Notes

A/N:

[1] When doing a direct blood transfusion, typically the donor has the tube connected to an artery (ie Sanji’s wrist) and the recipient is through a vein (ie Zoro’s elbow). Since arteries have higher blood pressure there is no ‘back flow’ of blood. HOWEVER, my medical knowledge is limited so somethings may be a tad inaccurate, but this fic is mostly for fun so I’m hoping that’s okay :D

Also I should mention that the car they got from Johnny and Yosaku has the steering wheel on of the right. Which is why when driving, Zoro’s uninjured shoulder is on Sanji’s left. (Confusing, I know. Sorry hehe)
Longing
Back on the road, Zoro kept a hand clasped across his mouth in tense apprehension, elbow propped on the open window as the wind ruffled his hair. Sanji peacefully unperturbed as Zoro mulled over the events that had just occurred that would no doubt finally draw attention to his activity and what was currently going on.

Despite dealing with the dead bodies – along with the gas station attendant that had unfortunately been killed by the hit men while trying to flee – as well as deleting the surveillance footage of the area; Zoro still wasn’t satisfied with how that situation had played out. Not only was it going to arouse suspicion among local authorities – even though they would never find the bodies – but it was bringing Zoro to the stark reality that he needed to get Sanji out of this situation now more than ever. Zoro had messed up.

And it was by sheer dumb luck that the three men hadn’t just shot the blond and came storming in after him to finish the job that their buddies had tried to start. A single bullet would’ve ended everything Zoro had been fighting to preserve, all because he hadn’t had the forethought to presume that there may be more people after him. It was tactless mistakes like these - which happened in old age and after retirement - that was going to cost Sanji his life.

Which brought him to the inevitable conclusion that he had to get Sanji under surveillance and as far away from Zoro as possible. It was a painfully inevitable conclusion that would’ve happened regardless, but Zoro had the grace to admit that a part of him had selfishly been clinging to these last few days. Days spent in each other's company that – despite the threat of death – had allowed him to spend such precious quality time with the blond that would no doubt immediately end upon their return to Merryville... or Zoro's death if he didn't manage to live through this whole torrid mess.

It was a solution he wasn't keen on, but had nonetheless thought about on occasion. Not a martyr, but returning to a town with a man that had no interest in him and a wife that no longer loved him wasn't incredibly motivating. There was a reason he had spent years using alcohol as a crutch, and maybe not returning at all wouldn't be the most terrible of solutions to everything...

Zoro was abruptly dragged from his spiralling, self-destructive, mental tirade as Sanji took the next turn off. Car rumbling over the gravelly parking lot as they pulled up to a brightly lit diner, wedged between a gas station and a rather grungy hotel. Concernedly glancing over at the blond beside him,
Zoro asked, “What are you doing?”

“I want dinner.” Sanji informed matter-of-factly though there was something in his expression that said there was clearly something else remaining unspoken. Casting a sideways glance at Zoro while clearly trying to attempt normalcy, he added, “Also I can smell your wounds.”

Zoro remained silent.

He was acutely aware at this point that fighting Sanji on such matters was pointless and hardly worth the effort. Simply grunting softly in acceptance as Sanji pulled the car into a vacant space and jumped out of the vehicle to locate the first aid kit from the backseat. Zoro got out with much less urgency, watching balefully until the blond rounded the car and practically dragged Zoro behind him into the restaurant. Before even locating a table, Sanji was guiding Zoro through the diner towards the bathroom with a hand around Zoro's wrist as though worried he might not follow.

Scowling in mild embarrassment, Zoro muttered, “You don't need to hold my hand...”

“Knowing you, you'd try to get out of this,” Sanji jibbed playfully, “Or probably get lost trying to follow me.”

“Oi.” Zoro grouched half-heartedly, following Sanji into the rather spacious and fairly well-kept bathroom, watching the blond balance the kit on the sink and flip it open for the countless time.

“C'mon. Off.” Sanji ordered with an absent wave of his hand, already preoccupied with the first aid kit as Zoro stiffly wrestled his shirt from his torso. Zoro had never been self-conscious about his nudity, however with Sanji he always found himself getting nervous over having the blond so near his exposed skin. It was a ridiculous though because Sanji had explicitly stated he didn't think of Zoro in that way, but it didn't stop Zoro from getting uncomfortable anyway.

“Hip's looking good,” Sanji noted after removing the old bandage and tossing it into the trash beside the sink, “but it would probably heal better if you weren't constantly reopening it.”

“Can't really help it.” Zoro huffed snidely.

Refusing to rise to the bait of Zoro's comment, Sanji cleaned and applied a new bandage before raising to do the same process with the other wound. Inspecting the stitches he had had to redo after Zoro had spectacularly torn them all free in their earlier confrontation, skin incredibly aggravated, but still healing remarkably well – mostly due to Sanji’s continuous attentiveness.

With a swab, the blond set about cleaning the wound as delicately as he could while still inspecting the area for any signs of infection. Deft, confident hands worked seamlessly on Zoro's injury, but he couldn't help but notice Sanji's gaze continuing to drift down from snapping back up. His hands strayed ever-so-slightly from their work before returning with even more rigour as though the blond was embarrassed with himself for looking.

It only took Zoro a moment to figure out what Sanji was distracted by, and he muttered in simple explanation, “Mihawk.”

“Huh?!” Sanji grunted in embarrassed shock, eyes rising to meet Zoro's as the smallest flush lit up his cheeks at the notion that he had been caught. Entire body stilling, hands hovering over the wound, he looked at Zoro with an expression of mild horror, “W-what?”

“That's who gave me the scar.” Zoro elaborated shortly, knowing without a shadow of a doubt that it was likely something that had piqued the blond's curiosity from the moment he had first seen it in the ambulance all those months ago. It wasn't an injury easily forgotten, and certainly not one many
people lived through.

“O-oh!” Sanji stuttered it understanding, gaze dropping to the floor as he floundered for a bit, clearly still flustered over being caught staring. Shaking his head, he finally managed to meet Zoro’s gaze and kept it pinned to him firmly as he managed, “Yeah, um... yeah.”

Zoro cocked an eyebrow at Sanji’s odd behaviour – contemplating on letting the blond know that he didn’t find his curiosity intrusive in anyway – but refrained from commenting. Instead, he watched as Sanji diligently pulled the packaging off a rather large stick-on bandage. Stepping in close to properly centre it as Zoro immediately tensed at the proximity. He was acutely aware of just how close the blond was, which parts of them were touching, and how good the man currently smelled.

Laying the patch with a firm press, Sanji kept a hand pinned on the corner as he ran his other across the bandage with a firm swipe to ensure it stuck properly. On the third pass, his hand pressed a little harder on the wound than usual, causing Zoro to inhale sharply at the sudden sting. Sanji’s hand froze in the motion as his head snapped up and Zoro found himself inexplicably breathless at how close Sanji was in that moment.

Zoro was not sure he was ever going to get accustomed to having Sanji’s hands on him – medically or not – and definitely never going to be used to having Sanji’s face this close to him. The moment only lasted a second, as Zoro looked at a concerned blond while his hands still remained pressed far too intimately to Zoro's chest.

The silence was broken a second later by the bathroom door swinging open as a man made to step inside.

“Out!” They both barked on instinct.

The portly man looked significantly startled, but backed out of the room nonetheless. Sanji retracted his hands as though burned and took an embarrassed step back while Zoro remained stoic, not entirely sure what to make of the situation. Instead he just pulled his shirt back on while Sanji threw out the remnants of the old bandages and pocketed the anti-septic.

“Come on.” Sanji urged with a tilt of his head towards the door, making his way back towards the dining area as he commented with a joking sneer, “I'm starving; not all of us can photosynthesize like you.”

“Oi...” Zoro grumbled with slow realization of the insult, following after the chuckling blond with an indignant scowl.

~X~

Instead of continuing on, they decided to crash at the run-down hotel next to the diner for the night, Zoro reluctantly giving permission. Bringing some necessary gear in with them, Zoro dropped onto one of the beds with a muffled groan of relief as Sanji went off to take a shower. This was the first time in hours that he was alone in the room, agitation causing his brow to knit together.

Despite the heart-wrenching danger Sanji had been put in previously that day, Zoro couldn’t deny that a fire had been lit inside of him since the confrontation that he hadn't felt in years. The danger, the exhilaration, the adrenaline; all that came from a good fight. All things he had so desperately missed. His hands were nearly shaking in excitement, not only from what had just happened, but also that he had managed to get through it without relapsing.

Zoro knew that given the circumstances, he was playing with fire, but couldn't stop his foolish mind
from growing excited at the possibilities; that maybe a full mental recovery wasn't entirely out of reach... However, a more rational part of himself reminded him about the more pertinent issue and the painful vicissitudes of this ironic catch twenty-two that he was caught in.

It was evidently clear that Zoro's control was ultimately due to Sanji's presence, which meant that if Zoro got the paramedic somewhere safe then there was a chance Zoro would lose his ability to keep going. If Sanji was safe, then it could very quickly cause Zoro to start relapsing again in the heat of battle when there wasn't someone he was constantly having to look out for.

And the truly depressing reality was that it wasn't feasible for him to keep Sanji along with him and keep them both safe. Either he was looking out for himself, or he was getting injured to protect Sanji; the two injuries he currently had were a testament to that.

Which meant he had no other choice than to continue with his original plan as fast as possible and get Sanji under protection from someone not corrupted. Even though he knew once this was all over, the chances of seeing Sanji again were slim; it was time to make good on his promise and get Sanji home, remove himself from the blond's life.

Huffing in frustration at the situation, he pushed himself out of the bed and stalked over to his bag. He removed one of the many guns provided by Johnny and Yosaku, sat down at the desk, and began slowly taking it apart and cleaning it. The gun was in practically pristine condition, but the methodical task numbed his mind enough to calm him, while at the same time helped him concentrate better on managing his whirling emotions.

By the time Sanji had finished his shower – emerging back into the room with a towel draped sinfully across his hips – Zoro still hadn't figured out a solution to getting them both out of this safely. Firmly keeping his gaze fixated on his hands as Sanji began changing behind him, he determined that the easiest course of action was getting Sanji somewhere safe and just keep his handicap a secret.

“Hey...”

Zoro fought a grimace as he could already tell from Sanji's tone that he wasn't going to like what the blond was going to goad him about in a moment. Pointedly keeping his gaze on the gun he was disassembling, he gave a small hum to show he heard the blond, “Hm?”

“Show me how you did that thing where you disarmed the guy with just your hands.”

“No.” Zoro replied simply, continuing to check over his gun.

“Why not?” Sanji goaded petulantly, and Zoro could tell from his tone alone that the man was not intending on giving up that easily. Finishing pulling on his shirt, he made his way over to the desk and loomed over Zoro's shoulder curiously while completely ignorant with how much his proximity caused Zoro's heart rate to sky rocket.

“It's not something you need to know.” He grumbled out as calmly as he could, frowning a bit harder as he tried to maintain focus on the weapon in his hands. The slide jammed in his agitation, and he had to wrestle with it for a few moments before finally getting it free and setting it aside.

“Bullshit.” Sanji snorted derisively, placing a hand on the desk as he leaned around and held up his other hand directly in front of Zoro's face, “I've had no less than five guns pulled on me since I've known you; you're telling me that being able to stop myself from getting shot isn't useful?”

Lowering the gun, Zoro levelled a gaze onto the blond with a hint of annoyance and rephrased, “It's not something I have the time to teach you.”
“Really?” Sanji raised a brow, “Cause from where I'm standing it seems like we're just bored and hanging out in a hotel room. Unless you have a better idea to spend some time?”

“I can't teach you something that takes years of practice to get right.” Zoro attempted once more at convincing the blond, turning back to the desk to dismiss the man, “You'll more likely get yourself shot than actually be able to do any good.”

“Jeez.” Sanji scoffed with a playful eye roll, turning to lean his rear against the desk while crossing his arms, tilting his head back at the ceiling and bemoaning, “It's like you don't even know what fun is.”

Zoro felt his eye unconsciously twitch at the words. Knowing immediately that it was all part of Sanji’s game to no doubt manipulate him into doing what he wanted, but unable to completely stop himself from getting riled at the comment. He glared astutely up at the man, as the blond just looked down with an expectant, yet confident smirk.

“Fine.” Zoro finally grunted in defeat, forcing himself to stamp down his annoyance at the smugness plastered across the blond's face and focus more on the simple ecstatic nature of his smile.

Pushing himself up from the desk, he snatched up his other gun that was not in the middle of being disassembled and stalked in front of the other man. Keeping his eyes on Sanji as he removed the magazine, and cocked the gun to empty the barrel before looping his finger through the trigger guard and allowing the gun to swivel down. Offering the grip to Sanji, he said, “Try and pull it on me.”

Sanji took the gun and Zoro found himself mildly impressed with how confidently the man handled it in comparison to the first time he had used one. It seemed all those summer evenings had actually taught the blond something, and maybe, if Zoro hadn't been so self absorbed in his own anxiety, he might've noticed sooner. After finishing adjusting his grip, Sanji looked up at Zoro and made a sound of confusion as the man's previous words sunk in, “Huh?”

“Try to shoot me.” Zoro clarified with a slightly slower tone meant to mock the blond just a tad, smirking as the corner of the blond's mouth twitched and he moved to raise his right arm. Shoulder barely moving before Zoro's hands were on the gun and easily snapping it out of Sanji's hand and into his own, cocked and raised to the blond's forehead before he could even blink. “You pull it on me and I'll consider showing you.”

“Wha-?” Sanji managed, still catching up on the events that had just occurred, before scowling at Zoro's smirk, holding out his hand, and snapping, “Alright, asshat; lemme try again.”

Shrugging, Zoro handed the gun back to him.

Once again Sanji adjusted it in his grip with ease and this time Zoro found an entirely new sensation of interest spark in his chest. A kind of fiery excitement that he had never before attributed to someone who happened to be handling a weapon, dealing with this new found attraction with mild horror as Sanji obliviously turned his attention back to Zoro.

Completely unaware of Zoro's minute freak out as his eyes watched Zoro carefully, the blond seemed to be waiting for something. Zoro was beginning to grow bored with Sanji's lack of movement and blinked tiredly, hearing the fabric of Sanji's sleeve move as he reached out and by the time his eyes were open again he had already recovered the gun and had it back pointed at the blond.

“Fuck off.” Sanji barked with a laugh, still obviously annoyed but allowing his childish awe over Zoro's abilities to show through ever-so-slightly. They tried several more times, each attempt as futile as the last with Zoro not even breaking a sweat as he allowed the blond several handicaps all to no
“Give up.” Zoro muttered in exasperation, once more taking the gun from the blond single-handedly as Sanji’s frustration was beginning to become apparent, “You can't get the drop on me.”

Holding out his hand firmly, Sanji ordered, “One more time.”

Rolling his eyes, Zoro handed off the gun and watched once more as Sanji went through the steps of getting it fitted into his palm before looking up at Zoro. Only this time his shoulders dropped and his face went white, gun going lax in his hands as his gaze was fixed on the hotel door behind Zoro in horror. Jaw dropping as his breath came out in a short, startled huff of fear that had Zoro turning abruptly and reaching for the second gun on his hip.

Everything going to still as there was nothing behind him, door still closed and the room completely empty as Zoro turned back to the blond in confusion only to find the barrel of his gun trained firmly on his forehead. The metal centimetres away and practically kissing the skin, Sanji watched Zoro with a large grin plastered across his face. Zoro’s brows furrowed at the blond as Sanji lowered the gun and guffawed.

“Really?!?” Sanji mocked in disbelief, “The ol' 'Oh no, look out! Behind you!' trick?”

Zoro’s jaw dropped softly as the realization set in that the other man had tricked him, and had technically gotten the drop on him. And with the gun that close there was very little Zoro could have done to disarm him as the odds of him pulling the trigger and decapitating him before he could get the gun angled elsewhere were very slim. There was also the sudden indignation that Sanji had used such a dirty trick to disarm him.

However, the genuine look of glee on the man's face stifled all annoyance at his motives as he simply couldn't find it in himself to be angry. He just stood there with a small smile of credulity on his face at the gall of the blond as he basked in the blinding grin on his handsome face. Sanji eventually offered the gun back to Zoro, still chipper as he crooned smugly, “That counts right?”

“Sure.”

“Well,” Sanji made a moue at the response as he was clearly hoping for a better reaction as he continued, “A deal's a deal; show me some stuff.”

Zoro was severely tempted to remind the blond that he had only offered to consider it, but couldn't find it in himself to crush Sanji's excitement. Giving in with a sigh, “…alright.”

Despite his reluctant tone, Zoro actually found himself a little pleased at the prospect of being able to work with the blond again. It had felt like ages since they had just hung out without the threat of death looming over their heads, and being able to do this made it feel like they were back at home – back at the field – where everything had been so much simpler.

For the better part of an hour Zoro went over different disarming techniques with Sanji, much to the blond's excitement. Picking up on the things Zoro was showing him far faster than was to be expected and remaining interested for much longer than he had assumed. By the time Zoro had him running through different scenarios he was actually impressed with how competent Sanji was at it.

Though it was clear Sanji was getting a tad too smug for such standard drills, and Zoro couldn't help but want to knock the man down a peg. Waiting for just the right moment. When Sanji disarmed the gun from his rather relaxed grip, making to flip it around, Zoro sprung into action. Blocking off the elbow, he twisted around, and forced Sanji's arm up until it had nowhere to go but directly towards
his own chin.

“Damn...” Sanji gritted in muted frustration, scowling in annoyance over how easily Zoro had changed his tactics and gotten one over on him. But Zoro had become accustomed to a lot of Sanji’s tells, and it was clear their was competitive fury still burning in his eyes. When Sanji made to get out of the hold, Zoro eased up just enough to see what Sanji was going to do.

Dropping the gun completely, Sanji snatched it out of the air with his free hand and turned into Zoro's hold until his back was up against Zoro's front. Despite having an arm in a painful lock around his own throat, but the position allowed Sanji to wrap his free arm around himself and thrust the gun into Zoro's ribs.

Eyebrows raising in surprise, Zoro remained frozen with Sanji in his arms as he was properly at a loss of words for what the blond had managed to do, seriously impressed, considering a few attempts ago the blond had been fumbling and dropping the damn gun. Zoro's surprise only lasted a few more moments until Sanji shifted and he was speechless for an entirely different reason. Zoro tried to get his bearings beyond the sensation of the entire length of Sanji's rigid form pressed fully against him, desperately trying to focus instead on Sanji's clever manoeuvre and the barrel of the gun currently digging into his hip. Keeping Sanji locked in place, he noted as politely as he could muster. “You’re a quick study.”

“You're not the worst teacher in the world.” Sanji admitted begrudgingly, words a little stressed due to the uncomfortable position he was still stuck in.

“I meant what I said earlier,” Zoro warned, “If anything goes wrong; don't try any of this. I don't need you shooting yourself.”

“Promise.” Sanji jeered, before prodding with a taunting voice, “So, how would you get out of this?”

Zoro scoffed, tightening the choke hold he had on Sanji by a fraction to remind the blond that he wasn’t entirely in charge of the situation. Allowing his grip to slacken once more as he growled, “Easy.”

Sanji sucked in a sharp breath, and Zoro could feel the entire motion against his front. Trying not to think perverse thoughts as Sanji stilled for several moments before murmuring carefully, “Show me.”

Zoro smirked against Sanji’s shoulder, a small huff of amusement the only warning he gave before he leapt into motion. Disarming Sanji’s hold on the gun with expert swiftness and spinning the blond out of the choke hold while at the same time bringing him to the ground.

Sanji barely hit the ground before the gun was trained on the back of his head, and when Sanji rose to roll over he froze as he felt the metal press against the back of his skull. Dropping down into a crouch, Zoro rested a knee lightly on the blond's back to keep him somewhat pinned, “Gotcha.”

“Alright...” Sanji muttered into the carpet somewhat petulantly, grunting heavily as he began shifting his weight from where Zoro was bearing down on him, “so what if I do this?”

In a swift movement Sanji was turning to knock Zoro's hand away with a perfectly timed snap of his arm and another twist on Zoro's wrist as the blond rolled out of reach. Zoro let it happen out of mild curiosity, finding himself being pinned face first into the floor a moment later with Sanji on top of him. A hand pressing firmly into his left shoulder as the other held his wrist in a vice grip, keeping it extended as Sanji held him just shy of an arm bar.

“What'd you think about that?”
“I think...” Zoro grumbled irritably, “that you should get off my injured shoulder.”

“Shit!” In an instant Sanji’s hands were retracting in horrified concern, giving Zoro all the opportunity he needed to turn over and snag the distracted paramedic. Flipping him over onto his back, Zoro used the momentum to roll on top of the blond, nab both his wrists, and pin him firmly to ground.

A smirk of amusement crooked the corner of his mouth while looming over the blond who stared up at Zoro with a look of utter betrayal on his face. Pushing the blond a little more firmly into the floor while chuckling, “I also think you shouldn't drop your guard so easily.”

“Cheap shot.” Sanji huffed breathlessly.

“That's for earlier.” Zoro rebutted smugly, leering down as the other man had the grace to look significantly guilty over what Zoro was alluding to, grimace eventually transforming into a sheepish smile that had Zoro rolling his eyes at the man’s hardly apologetic behaviour.

Sanji’s lighthearted grin eventually faded as the reality of where they were and what they were doing slowly crept back. Blue eyes darting down - for only a moment - allowing Zoro to realize just how inappropriate this whole situation had become, how unacceptable his behaviour had been.

Hands retracting from Sanji’s wrists with a horrified jerk, he pushed himself from Sanji as quickly as he could while averting his gaze, not wanting to see the awkward - or pitying look - he knew was probably reflected in the blond’s eyes. He kneeled beside Sanji as the blond slowly pushed himself up, propping his body up with his hands braced behind him. “Zoro...”

Tone speaking volumes of what Sanji was about to bring up, Zoro panicked and immediately pushed himself to his feet. Not in the mood for this ridiculous pity-party of a conversation Sanji kept insisting on trying to have with him, especially whenever Zoro accidentally over-stepped his bounds. Stalking away, he left Sanji still sprawled on the floor as he grumbled, “I'm going to bed.”

~X~

Another couple days on the road without incident brought them closer and closer to the Nepalese border. Higher and higher into the mountains the highway took them as the road sides became more barren and rock edifices cradled them through the rising hills. Towns become fewer and farther between as the deserted highway left them truly isolated.

Days were spent in relative silence with one driving and the other sleeping, casual conversation taking place in between. Zoro was beginning to learn far more about the other man than he had ever expected to. Things like his favourite foods and colours, what tea he preferred – black – which numbers were lucky, and what he feared. Each thing adding onto the multitudinous pile of things that already made him fond of the man (which also meant it was more he was going to have to learn to let go when they returned to Merryville).

As they were now, Sanji had messily tied his hair back in the afternoon heat and cracked the window to enjoy a cigarette while waxing on about cooking with his uncle. Summer holidays spent in the back of his restaurant, learning to cook, and getting some proper manners bestowed upon him, chuckling over his bratty behaviour with a tender smile while staring distantly out the window.

A sign noting that they were soon going to reach the highest point on the highway piqued Zoro's attention as his gaze shifted to the blond. Gaze ever turned toward the view out his window in a relaxed wonder, but a slightly bored expression clear on his face from the hours spent trapped in the vehicle.
Easing up on the gas, Sanji's attention sparked out of his daze as he turned to watch questioningly. Zoro slowed the car as they neared the pull out, rolling to a stop before cutting the engine and removed his seat belt.

“What are we doing here?”

“Ditching you.” Zoro replied flatly.

“Ha. Ha.” Sanji grunted flatly, “Really?”

“A break.” Zoro explained honestly with an innocent shrug, choosing to leave out the fact that it was a pitiful excuse on his part to spend even a few more moments with the blond. Even though they were still hours from crossing the border, he still had a suspicion that once he got Sanji to safety then everything would change, “Stretch our legs.”

Sanji seemed honestly perplexed, but nonetheless followed Zoro's lead out of the car, both of them immediately caught up in the wind that gusted across the mountain top. Attempting to light a cigarette before giving up, Sanji sauntered over to the large boulder at the pull out area, Zoro only a few steps behind.

“What's it say?” Sanji asked.

“Highest point in the highway.”

Nodding softly in understanding, Sanji's lips pursed in clear contemplation as he began walking towards the edge of the lookout. Zoro following shortly after as the blond came to a stop just a few feet from where the gravel of the parking area melded into the grassy knoll of the cliff, watching curiously as Sanji stood for several moments just staring out at the view in silent appreciation.

Zoro did the same as the summer sunset cast a glorious glow on the valley far below, highlighting trees and rock faces in a spectacular array of brilliant oranges and soft yellows. The sight a breathtaking view; reminding him of the lakes, mountains, and fields of home that he had never expected he would miss.

Glancing out of the corner of his eyes at the blond, his hands clenched in his pockets at the usual rush he would never get used to feeling upon seeing the man with his guard down. He remained curiously silent as Sanji cast a glance around to ascertain there was no one else around before turning back to the valley, arms raised with a sharp inhale before yelling suddenly.

“WOOOOOOOOOOOHOOOOOOOOOOOO!” Sanji bellowed the exuberant cry with a long, drawn out wail, a smile on his face and excitement in his eyes. Zoro's heart ached at the sight, Sanji’s voice echoing through him as he tried desperately to remind himself that this man wasn't his to have, that smile wasn't for him, and those eyes were never going to look at him the way he wanted.

Cry finally trailing off, Sanji's shoulders sagged and his arms fell to his sides, turning to look at Zoro expectantly with a childish grin still plastered on his lips. Zoro just watched the blond as the smile finally faded until he was just calmly looking at Zoro, eyes darting towards the valley with a short incline of his head in invitation.

A reluctant sigh heaved from Zoro's shoulders as he took a step forward until he stood on the edge of the cliff top with Sanji, the valley stretching out below them with intense beauty. A wave of vertigo hitting him despite the distance he still maintained from the mountain's edge, the head rush an exhilarating spike of adrenaline as he raised his hand.

Coughing into his fist with a grumble, he cleared his throat as best he could before tossing his head
back, spreading his arms wide and howled as loud as his lungs could handle. Fists clenching as the
wind rustled his clothes and hair in a dishevelled mess, and the valley echoed with the sounds of his
Tarzan cry.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA !!!”

Shoulders sagging when he eventually ran out of breath, his arms slowly lowered to his sides and his
fists unclenched as he turned to look at Sanji with a stupid grin still plastered across his face. Sanji
was still smiling too, however it was overshadowed by the look of sincere surprise and misplaced
fondness.

Zoro made a facial jerk as though to question the blond.

An incredulous laugh tore out of Sanji, splitting his face as he giggled ridiculously for several
moments, crinkled eyes never leaving Zoro's before finally responding seriously, “Impressive.”

“Thanks.” Zoro inclined his head, mimicking Sanji’s mock seriousness while a smile of his own was
unable to be kept from his lips. Turning his gaze back out towards the valley as a comfortable silence
fell between the two men, they spent the next several minutes simply remaining in each others
company while the last few rays of daylight illuminated the vision before them.

Although it seemed as though Sanji had warmed up to him drastically over the past couple days, and
he had admitted that a lot of what he had said back in Merryville had been due to shock, maybe once
this was all over, Sanji wouldn't want to completely cut him from his life. Maybe he'd be okay with
letting Zoro be in it despite his feelings for the blond, maybe it wasn't all for naught.

TBC...
Deals

Chapter Notes

Unfortunately an exposition chapter. Next chapter will be much more action packed and has some of my fav scenes in it :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Another couple of days had taken them out of China, through Nepal, and into the bustling hubbub of India. Travelling across the massive country to reach Mumbai had been a delightful journey that had been suspiciously uninterrupted aside from a single unfortunate detour. A dense humidity hovered across the highway which had been crammed with traffic and lined with Dhabbas – local shoppes where people served heavy food and crisp tea.

They enjoyed the food while crawling along with the pace of traffic, windows rolled down to endure the summer heat as the radio blared old Hindi songs. Sanji spent most of the drive with his feet resting on the dash, head bobbing along to the music as he watched the diverse landscape roll past. The entire place a dramatic shift from the small rural community he had spent half his life in.

It took them a total of two days to reach Mumbai in which there had been a close call while stopping at a local tourist spot; where a man had been following them for several minutes before Zoro had gotten fed up with his indecisive stalking. When Sanji had his back turned, Zoro slipped away long enough to subtletly wrap an arm around the man's neck and place a hand on the man's mouth, smothering him before knocking him off the viewing platform; easy enough to make it look like an accident when people were far more distracted by the view than with what was going on behind them. When people had begun to gather over the railing to check and see if the man was alright, Zoro had taken the opportunity to wrap an arm around the curious blond and lead with him away with an innocent moue plastered across his face.

It wasn't long before they were driving beneath the large signboard welcoming them to Mumbai and the subsequent city traffic within. The streets were packed – an orderly chaos set about as pedestrians and vehicles intermingled – street lights, street sails, tall buildings, and attractive shopping centres, as well as some areas that were reserved for the slums. The small houses the poor lived in were vividly coloured and beautifully adorned; kept as clean as possible to garner respect.

The drive to South Mumbai was long, but went unnoticed by the blond who kept his head out the window for nearly the entire ride. Zoro had been here a few times before and he supposed that from Sanji's perspective this was practically a vacation. Aside from the ever present threat of murder...

Taking a reprieve from his sight seeing, Sanji ducked back into his seat with an excited grin as he alluded to a conversation that had taken place the other day, “Your old partner lives here?”

“Yeah,” Zoro noted absently, beginning to keep an eye out for a secluded area to stash the car, “He used to work for the Embassy in Delhi before getting married; he’s been stationed here undercover ever since.”

“A lecherous grin split Sanji’s face as he teased, “You’re allowed to tell me all this? Not too confidential? No one’s going to come after me?”

While stopped at a red light, Zoro took the opportunity to turn a flat gaze towards the blond - having spent the last week stuck in a car with the man and gotten well acquainted with his biting small talk and childish behaviour - and muttered, “The worst has literally already happened.”

“True.” Sanji agreed with a congenial shrug, letting the snide comment go without so much as batting an eye, “But when we get home it won’t become an issue?”

Sanji’s choice of words piqued Zoro’s interest immediately as he noted Sanji had said when, not if,
but when they got home. He had known Sanji had trusted him - just the fact that he had allowed Zoro to drag him halfway across the world was a testament to that - but at no point could he recall the blond talking about when this whole ordeal was over. Zoro had admittedly been wavering in his belief, but Sanji’s words suddenly made him realize he needed to make sure he didn’t make a liar out of the blond.

A soft smile touched Zoro’s lips as he grunted fondly, “It’ll be fine.”

“Alright.” Sanji cajoled, gaze turning out the window once more as he added, “I’m holding you to that.”

“Fine by me.” Zoro chuckled, circling a few side streets and twisting roads before finding an adequate area and parked the vehicle near an abandoned construction site. While he set about replacing the licence plate to help them blend more seamlessly into the city, Sanji climbed a few floors of the unrestricted shell of a building and took in the scene of the city in awe.

Casting a cautious glance at Sanji before flipping open the burner phone, Zoro scanned through the multiple dossiers that Johnny had made until he found the number he was looking for. Punching it in and waiting as it rung, he kept an eye on Sanji who was distracted by the view of the city afforded to them.

A click and an answer. “Hello?” Was grunted into the phone carefully.

“Hey.” Zoro couldn't stop himself from grinning, propping the phone against his ear with his shoulder as he began collecting all the papers he had been digging through and shoving them back in his bag. Pulling the zipper shut as he noted, “Been a while.”

There was a long pause before a deep voice chuckled down the line, and an American accent muttered sardonically, “I was wondering when you were going to call...”

“Word's reached you, huh?” Zoro chuckled, relieved to hear such a familiar voice from such an old friend. Taking the phone up in his grip once more as he turned his gaze back to Sanji, keeping a wary eye on the blond as he waited for a response.

“A little too late it seems.” the voice noted, “Good to hear you're still alive.”

“You probably know why I'm calling then.” Zoro noted cryptically. While he trusted that with the disposable device there was no one listening in on their call, he didn’t want to take any chances. The less spoken between them the safer it was for everybody involved, and while he trusted the other man with his life, he certainly didn't want to put him in danger for his own selfish reasons.

“Obviously. You've gotten yourself in trouble and now I have to bail you out,” A pause and a humorous jibe, “just like old times.”

“You've gotten yourself in trouble and now I have to bail you out,” the man sighed decisively, “Meet at the spot we did last time you were here. I'll find you.”

“Ahh.” Zoro got in return which immediately had a smile splitting his face, the man was as amiable as he had remembered him. Snapping the phone shut, Zoro watched as Sanji bounded
down the last few steps of the cement stairs and made his way back to where Zoro remained by the car. Curious look on his face as he took in Zoro’s relieved smile, “Who was that?”

“An old friend.”

~X~

Taking everything Zoro deemed important, he left only what he could in the car just in case they wouldn’t be able to make it back to it, or if it happened to get towed or broken into. They slowly made their way towards the waterfront and to the designated cafe that he had been ordered to wait at.

Sanji was far too polite as he practically danced to avoid bumping into people, and apologizing profusely to far too many people that he did end up hitting. Most of them looking at him a little strangely as it was very apparent from his American state of dress and loud accent that he was a tourist. Zoro didn’t fair much better, but his mother’s soft Japanese features tended to make many people assume he was from the North-Eastern states rather than overseas.

Zoro allowed the blond his kind antics since they weren’t in any particular rush – not to mention it gave Zoro an opportunity to get his bearings which had more often than not, sent him in the wrong direction. They eventually reached Marine Drive amidst the bustle of activity and sightseeing taking place along the oceanfront.

If everything went according to plan then by tonight he might have an idea of who had set the bounty on him, and Sanji would be in the careful watch of Kohza. Once Zoro had enough of a head start and had gotten the trail off of Sanji, he would ideally have Kohza take Sanji home and begin getting him set up once more. New apartment, expenses covered, back and settled down like none of this had ever happened. There would no doubt be questions and curious, nosey neighbours, but nothing Kohza couldn’t handle.

In that time Zoro would find the bastard that had caused this whole mess and put a stop to it. Then he’d make his way back home, where he too would continue on as though nothing occured between them, harbour his emotions as he would no doubt run into Sanji from time to time and have to endure a pitying glance, and resign himself to growing old with his wife.

A flare of guilt had him pulling the burner phone from his pocket and flipping it open, thumb hovering over the keys as Kalifa’s memorized number came to the forefront of his mind. With their history, she no doubt trusted his abilities to get out of this situation alive, but it probably didn’t stop her from worrying about him. Despite how distant they had become in their relationship they hadn’t stopped caring for each other and he felt horrible for dismissing her so easily as soon as this whole mess had started.

“Moss!”

Snapping the phone shut, pocketing it as he turned to look up at the chipper blond coming up beside him with two servings of street vendor food in his hands. Trying to push the massive amount of whirling emotions to the back of his mind, Zoro tried to focus on enjoying the here and now. Even though it meant nothing to Sanji, and somehow felt like an illicit affair to him.

“It's called Bhel Puri.” Sanji explained with near child-like glee on his face, Zoro's heart flipping over itself at the man's expression before immediately deflating once more in muted rejection. He desperately reminded himself that his only job here was to get Sanji home safely, and not intrude on his life anymore...

This whole ordeal was such a mess.
Stamping down the incessant well of negativity threatening to drown him, he instead took a seat with Sanji and took a massive bite of the aromatic food Sanji had purchased, wondering if he crammed enough of it into his face it might fill the gaping hole in his chest left there by the man currently sitting beside him.

They sat and ate quietly as Sanji made small talk about the city and the food, and how excited he was to try cooking somethings for himself when he got back home, conveniently not mentioning the fact that his apartment was in shambles. They watched the sun crawl closer towards the horizon before a voice pulled them from their isolation.

“Well, I'll be damned.” Both glanced up to see a man striding towards them with a grin plastered across his face, once lighter skin much more tan now from the years spent working in India, and his short blond hair made even fairer by the constant sun. Stopping in front of Zoro with a cheeky grin, tilting his shades back to properly take in Zoro's - no doubt - harried deposition and commenting bitingly, “Good to see retirement is going well.”

“'Bout as well as expected.” Zoro shrugged with a chuckle, rising and offering his hand which Kohza snagged before pulling him in to an aggressive one armed hug. Eventually stepping back, Kohza brought both hands up to grasp Zoro's upper arms in barely restrained excitement.

“Good to see you!”

“You too.” Zoro affirmed, the relief in his voice tangible.

Kohza's hands gave a final squeeze before falling away and his gaze rounded on the blond who had also risen from his seat to join the conversation. Staring Sanji directly in the eye, Kohza asked Zoro cautiously, “Who's your friend?”

“This is Sanji.” Zoro gestured vaguely as Kohza reached out to take Sanji's hand in a firm shake with a nod of greeting. Zoro found himself failing in providing a suitable explanation for the events that lead him to having to drag Sanji along without having to out himself to Kohza in the middle of a crowded street. So he managed a regretful, “They're after him too.”

Zoro could tell Sanji was casting a glance his way, but refused to acknowledge it as he kept his gaze firmly on Kohza. The man mulled over the words with a suspicious air, and Zoro could tell by his expression that he would be having a conversation with the man about it later.


“It's my fault.” Zoro clarified, “I can't have him getting hurt because of me.”

Kohza watched him critically for several moments as years in the field together had afforded them the ability to share an infinite amount through a glance. It wasn't long before Kohza had no doubt assumed what Zoro was implying and he began stating carefully, “Any friend of yours is mine...”

Gaze shifting to Sanji as he muttered with a smirk, “Considering he doesn't have many.”

Zoro didn't have to look at the blond to tell he was dramatically rolling his eyes before agreeing cheekily, “Tell me about it; I like to think he got lost and couldn't find them back.”

“Appropriate.” Kohza commented through a snicker, Zoro already regretting what he could very easily see was going on between the two. A passing couple caught sight of them snickering, before looking away and they were reminded of how in public they still were. “Probably best we get you out of sight sooner than later. I assume you have a car with you?”
Zoro nodded.

With a smile and a polite gesture Kohza murmured, “Then lead the way.”

~X~

Upon entering Kohza's house they were met with an instant wave of spices and warm home cooking. The place kept impeccably tidy, but with a well lived in feeling to it. Casting a cautious look about Zoro muttered, “You sure it's safe having us?”

“It's fine.” Kohza assured as he finished toeing off his shoes and placing them aside, “Nowhere safer than here with us.”

“No one knows we’re here?”

“Nope.” Kohza confirmed, before patting Zoro on the back consolingly, “As soon as I heard you had bounty on your head I knew it was only a matter of time before you showed up on my doorstep. I planned to have you stay here until we got this whole thing sorted; Stussy is completely on board.”

“That means a lot but…”

“But nothing,” Kohza interrupted firmly, “It’s worth the risk. Hell, if I get court martialed for helping you then I couldn’t think of any other way I’d rather go.”

“Court martialed?” Sanji interjected in horror. “You never said you could get court martialed?!”

Both men turned to look at the appalled blond as Zoro gave a small shrug, “If someone is manipulating the CIA to have me killed then it’s inevitable; and even if they’re not and we get out of this - if they find out what’s happened then I will definitely get reprimanded for everything I’ve done.”

“I - I had no idea…” Sanji stammered, looking utterly torn. Zoro couldn’t help feeling a little guilty over Sanji’s misinformed horror, his assumption that the blond understood exactly what Zoro was risking was entirely his own oversight.

“It’s fine.” Zoro reassured with a small shake of his head, “With or without you I would have done this anyway.”

Sanji seemed like he still had much more he wanted to say, but his gaze flickered to Kohza before eventually shutting his mouth and looking away. Zoro wasn’t sure if Sanji’s silence was making it easier for him or not, but he was certain he hadn't heard the end of this conversation.

“I have an undercover contact who's helped me on several occasions.” Kohza informed Zoro while breaking the jilted silence, “He should be here now to see if we can get an idea on who's trying to get you killed. Though that list could be in the hundreds…”

Sanji cast a wry glance towards Zoro and murmured, “You said the same thing.”

“A lot of people would be happy if this guy were dead.” Kohza agreed, “I'm just hoping it's not anyone from back home; getting involved with a Burn Notice is not my dream scenario.”

“I had my suspicions.” Zoro agreed quietly, “I'd like to think they wouldn't be so sneaky about it. However, I haven't decided to let the idea go just yet--”

“Roronoa…” Came a shrewd tone that had all three looking up to see the woman standing
confidently in the archway leading to the dining area. Arms crossed over her chest, a finger tapped impatiently as she mused, “Three years now I believe?”

“Just about.” Zoro managed a little sheepishly.

A smirk flashed across her face, “Not going to empty my entire liquor cabinet again are you?”

Zoro chuckled as Stussy’s snide attitude was just as he remembered it, “No promises.”

Stussy let her hands fall to her hips with a derisive shake of her head, initial showboating over as her attention turned to Sanji, a flicker of interest gleaming in her eyes. “And who is this fine fellow?”

Before Zoro or Khoza could introduce the blond, Sanji was inclining his head before introducing himself, “I’m Sanji; it’s an absolute pleasure to be invited into your home.”

Stussy looked thoroughly confused by Sanji’s actions before snorting loudly as she sauntered over to Kohza, “You ought to take some manner lessons from him, Roronoa. Might do you some good.”

Zoro just grunted, not needing yet another person reminding him of how too good Sanji was for him. Focusing on removing his own shoes as Stussy walked past them to give her husband a peck on the cheek to welcome him home. Kohza pulling back to ask, “Coby here?”

“Upstairs.” Stussy gestured with a vague tilt of her head as she released Kohza and began to meander back towards the kitchen, “Dinner will be ready in thirty minutes; so don’t take too long.”

“Mind if I lend a hand?” Sani offered congenially as he made his way towards her, placing his hand near his mouth as he falsely whispered, “I feel like I will just be getting in the way.”

“Come along then.” She simpered, “You can help prepare the Kulfi while I finish with the chicken.”

“Fantastic!” Sanji boasted eagerly, already beginning to roll up his sleeves on his button up while following after Stussy. Zoro watching them go before turning a wary glance towards Kohza, the man already watching him with narrowed eyes but refraining from commenting. Instead, he politely gestured towards the stairs before leading Zoro further into the house. They made their way by the spare bedroom - that he noted they would be able to use for the next few days - before reaching the den at the end of the hall.

Upon entering, they found a young man who could barely be out of his adolescent years - lounging in an office chair, phone in hand, thumb scrolling numbly across the screen as he vaguely glanced up to see the two men entering. Several large monitors were set up behind him - all running different programs - and there was an impressive amount of surveillance equipment as well. It appeared to be Kohza’s home office, though judging from the bags near the young man’s chair and the gear he had haphazardly set up some of it belonged to him.

“Zoro Roronoa!” Coby exclaimed sharply, bounding out of his chair with fervour as his hand shot to his brow in a salute, before lowering and extending it. Wide eyes unblinking in his excitement, “It is an honor, sir!”

“Thanks.” Zoro grunted awkwardly, taking the excitable man’s hand and shaking it while muttering, “Don’t call me sir.”

“I’m sorry, sir!” Coby stuttered, ignoring the request as the young agent gushed, “It’s just I’ve heard the stories; you’re a legend!”

“They’re likely exaggerated.” Zoro said, forcefully retracting his hand from Coby’s.
“Jeez, Coby.” Kohza grunted, “You’ve never shown me this kind of respect. What the hell, man?”

“Eh, you’re kind of cool.” Coby offered with a lazy shrug, bursting out into a cackle when the older man attempted to slap him across the back of the head.

“You ungrateful…” Kohza growled, though there wasn’t any malice to his tone, watching as Coby fell back into the office chair with a guffaw before ordering, “Get to work.”

“Alright!” Coby jeered happily, spinning around in his chair as he clasped his fingers and extended his hands in front of himself until the knuckles cracked audibly. Shaking the fingers out, he brought them down to hover over his keyboard with an excited wiggle, “What am I looking for?”

“The bounty on my head.” Zoro explained simply, “And who set it.”

The boy let out a low whistle and set to work pulling up some coded screens and search engines as he began furiously typing away. Zoro was completely lost on what the boy was doing, but assumed it must be akin to the tech work a lot of the lab work down back at the CIA. Field work was his area of expertise but he could hardly do his job if it hadn't been for the desk jockeys that made the mission dossiers that let him know everything he needed for his assignments.

However, this kid was much faster than any of the people he had seen back while working in America, and he seemed much more proficient. Every once in a while Zoro would recognize a digitized map with longitudes and latitudes pinpointing locations, or the occasional bit of language naming a city or place. But most of it was complete gibberish.

After several minutes a map was pulled up across the larger monitor above and all three men looked up in mild concern over what was displayed. A map of world was laid out with dozens upon dozens of markings alight across all continents and within multiple countries. Zoro wasn't entirely sure what it meant but he had a suspicion it wasn't going to be good.

“What's this?”

“That…” Coby murmured with a hint of confusion in his tone, “is showing every location that the bounty was originally posted from.”

“How?” Zoro scowled.

“Well, it's clearly not being sent out from all these IP addresses simultaneously which means someone has done some fantastic coding to trick my systems into believing it. Also at the rate this message is being sent out it has also closed itself off from multiple addresses linked with all sorts of high end government affiliates.” Coby gave a low whistle, hand coming up to rest atop the scarf tied up to keep his bangs from his face, “Whoever wants you dead wants the baddies to know and wants the big guys to stay out of it.”

“English please.”

Heaving a dramatic sigh Coby gestured at the screen and rephrased, “Someone better than me is making a false trail; I can't trace it.”

Zoro made a dissatisfied noise.

“I'm not sure who you made enemies with… but this isn't some second rate job.” Coby murmured before looking over his shoulder at Zoro, “You pissed off someone. Have anyone in mind?”

“There's one guy I could think of.” Kohza butted in thoughtfully.
“No.”

“How about it—”

“No.” Zoro denied for a second time, not wanting to even entertain the idea that Sanji had already mentioned. Not because he would hate for the blond to be right, but because he didn’t think he could handle it if he was. Zoro was already prepared for the notion that whoever wanted him dead was not going to be a pleasant individual, but having it be his old nemesis would be too much of a headache.

“Alright, well. Suspects aside, we still need to find out where this damn bounty originated from; it’s our only lead.” Kohza murmured, before directing his attention to the younger man, “Any ideas?”

“Well, there’s Law. You guys could go get him.” Coby offered with a shrug, “I... I don’t even know where to begin with this coding, but he would probably have some ideas.”

“That’s true…” Kohza contemplated softly, fingers tapping against his lips softly in contemplation before admitting, “Forgot about him.”

“Alright.” Zoro goaded, glancing between the two men impatiently, “Where is he?”

Coby looked up at Zoro incredulously, before snorting, “I don’t know.”

A low growl rumbled in Zoro’s throat at the kid’s tone.

“No one does.” Coby defended nervously as he back tracked, “He likes his privacy.”

Zoro tilted his head in clear confusion, “Then how do I find him?”

“Viola Riku.” Kohza muttered, Zoro turning his attention to the older man as he continued as Coby returned to his computer and began hurriedly typing, “She gets you a meeting with him.”

Straightening his stance, Zoro crossed his arms wearily as this whole thing was becoming more of a headache than it already was. Working under the radar was always much more complicated compared to when he had the full might of the American government behind him. But in this case he might actually be fighting against them. Heaving a sigh, he grunted, “Anyone else more convenient?”

“Not on the coast.” Kohza murmured, “Unless you want to go on a goose chase; and I’m assuming you don’t want to deal with anyone within an agency either.”

“Alright.” Zoro conceded quickly as he knew exactly what Kohza was getting at, “How can I contact her?”

“She will only deal with you in person,” Kohza clarified, “You’ll have to pay her a visit; I’ll get you her contact information. She owes me a favour anyway after I got one of her brothers cleared of false charges.”

“She just got married.” Coby noted, both men glancing down as the pink haired boy continued to filter through the multiple social media accounts he had open simultaneously on his browser. Fingers once more skittering across the keys as he added, “Her reception’s tomorrow.”

“We don’t have that kind of time.” Zoro shook his head as his gaze remained on the monitor. Noting amongst the many photos and websites littering the screen that he could make out the same attractive Indian woman in each photo that was no doubt Viola, “The longer we stay in one place the worse it is.”
“I mean...” Kohza shrugged, “You could always just go. I don’t know if bothering her at her wedding is the best way to get on her good side, but it’s either that or wait a couple weeks until they’re back from their honeymoon.”

“You know that’s not an option.” Zoro shook his head begrudgingly.

“True.” Kohza mused before glancing at Coby, “How easy will it be to get in?”

“It’s a huge reception; you’ll probably be able to slip in fairly easily.” Coby noted as he had continued cataloguing the other days of the wedding ceremony. It also appeared as though he had already found the location of the ceremony and was scoping out the venue it would be held at, “Just keep a low profile.”

“You’d have to go alone…” Kohza added wearily, “If we get seen together you and Sanji will get traced back here.”

“That won’t be an issue.” Zoro dismissed easily, “I’d rather you stay behind with him anyway.”

“Honey!” Stussy’s voice from downstairs injected heir conversation rather pointedly, “Come help me set the table for our guests!”

“Moment, dear.” Kohza called as he made his way out of the room, giving a brief, “We can finish this later; you both must be hungry.”

“Be there in a moment.” Zoro muttered absently, turning back to the monitors stationed above that were still displaying the multiple locations which his bounty had apparently been posted from, trying to come up with possible explanations as to why someone would want to order him dead but go to such lengths to keep themselves hidden. The whole thing reeked of foul play and perhaps a much larger issue that he wasn’t aware of.

There had been questionable black-ops cases he had worked, there were definitely some political deaths - in and outside of America - that he was responsible for. For all he knew, someone might have found out, or perhaps decided, that it was time to shut his mouth for good, just in case. Though how far this stretched and who was involved was still a baffling mystery…

Eyes falling to the younger man still enthralled by his computer, Zoro decided to make a point. Just to be sure. Leaning down so he could get a better look at what Coby was doing, his gaze narrowed as he mused, “You honestly can’t track the bounty?”

Coby visibly jumped, head snapping to the side to look at Zoro in mild confusion as he stuttered, “N-no, sir!”

“If I find that you’re lying to me...” Zoro whispered under his breath to the younger man, hand falling to his shoulder as a terrified chill was already causing the kid’s spine to snap straight as he whimpered softly. Baring his teeth in a demonic grin, Zoro growled, “I will take whoever is dearest to you; and kill them while you watch. Do you understand?”

A death rattle slid from the young man’s throat as he wheezed in terror and nodded stiffly in response, going limp the moment Zoro released him - but not before giving the boy a friendly pat on the should and smirking amiably, “Good man.”

Zoro knew Kohza wouldn’t call over anyone he couldn’t trust with his life, but it didn’t hurt to put a little bit of fear into the man - just in case. Though judging from his behaviour there was nothing off about him, however Zoro couldn’t pass up an opportunity to strike some fear into the newer generation. A humorous smirk tugging at his lips as his hands slid into his pockets, he made his way
back towards the dining room where he could already smell the tantalizing aromas of Stussy's cooking.

~X~

“A wedding?” Sanji inquired curiously, fork hovering above his plate absently as Kohza had gotten them caught up on their plan over the dinner table. A colourful array of dishes were spread across the table - there was rice, dal, butter chicken and Palak Paneer. Zoro quietly nibbled at the chicken, savouring the taste. It reminded him of home… and that in turn reminded him that it had been over a week since he had had any form of home cooking - something he didn’t think he would come to miss.

“Don’t abuse their open bar like you did ours.” Stussy piped up as she finished topping up Coby’s glass - the boy looking remarkably less terrified now that he wasn’t alone in a room with Zoro, “I think you drank more than everyone else there collectively.”

“Probably.” Zoro conceded easily. Before he had been forced to get sober by his therapist, there had been a lot of recreational drinking to make up for his boredom and lack of a job; his drinking had been awful before, but after his mental breakdown, he had gone off the deep end. There was a vague memory of Kohza and Stussy’s wedding, as well as one of him waking up in the rose bushes the next morning.

“I must know,” Sanji interjected with an imploring grin as Stussy finally took a seat, “What kind of drunk is he? Is he even more of a broody, shut in grandpa than usual?”

Stussy cackled wickedly and her eyes snapped to Zoro, “Oh, Zoro. I do love your friend.”

“Everyone does apparently.” Zoro muttered, catching Sanji’s playful grin from across the table and refraining from groaning. It seemed like Stussy and Sanji had become fast friends in the time they had been left alone and he wasn’t sure he could handle two conniving blond’s at the moment.

“And Sanji,” Stussy ignored Zoro’s comment and turned back to the paramedic with a conspiratorial whisper, “Most chipper drunk you’ve ever met; all smiles and laughter. Well, until…”

Stussy’s words trailed off as she realized she had overstepped her bounds, guilty snatching up her drink to take a hasty sip as an odd silence fell on the table. Sanji clearly a little at a loss as Kohza immediately butted in with a loud crow as his hand fell to Zoro’s back in a hard smack, “My boy’s sober now though! Two years, right? Can you believe it?”

“Barely.” Stussy snorted lightly, trying to maintain her early facade so as not to turn the whole dinner into a pity fest that she knew Zoro would not enjoy. Zoro knew she only meant well, most of their relationship had been cutting remarks and jibes at each other, but as he forced out a chuckle, it felt hollow. Despite her teasing, it was hard to ignore the fact that the idea of a drink had been becoming more and more welcoming as the week had drawn out. Not only with everything that was happening, but the stress of Sanji was also starting to get to him.

“I’m better.” Zoro managed with a smile, “Promise.”

“Sure.” Stussy smirked, finishing a bite of her food before continuing, “So even if you don’t intend to drown yourself; how’re you going about this whole wedding thing?”

Kohza let his gaze wander to Zoro as he commented idly, “I suggest you go armed.”

“C’mon, what could go wrong at a wedding?” Sanji jeered playfully.
“You've clearly never been to one.” Zoro drawled flatly.

“Many of her family are connected to gangsters.” Kohza explained tentatively to Sanji, “The likelihood of someone recognizing him is slight, but still possible.”

“I can handle a few rowdy gangsters.” Zoro placated easily, there were far worse people after him than some third rate mafia thugs that might decide to start something. Enjoying another bite of Stussy's delicious cooking before muttering offhandedly to Kohza. “Have anything I can wear?”

“I think I have something nice laying around,” Kohza mused while scooping some more butter chicken onto his plate, “Should be suitable enough.”

“You're going alone?” Sanji interjected. Zoro's eyes flickered over to where Sanji sat across from him, finding disappointment and worry shining in his eyes. It was becoming easier to meet the blond’s gaze without fighting the urge to blush, but dealing with distraught emotion was definitely more of a challenge.

“Remember what happened last time?” Zoro rebuked rhetorically, not even needing to gesture towards the hole in his shoulder that was still giving off a dull ache. “You're staying here.”

Sanji seemed like he was immediately going to argue the point, but their company seemed to be enough to quiet him. Making a petulant sound, snagging up his drink and taking a sip as it was clear he was attempting to hide his pout. A cough that was clearly attempted to be smothered came from the end of the table as Coby hacked into his plate for a few moments before Zoro continued firmly.

“Besides, soon as I find where Law is I'm sending you home.” Zoro explained, casting a glance at Kohza and silently requested the man go along with what he was about to say. Though ever since Zoro had introduced Kohza to Sanji, he had no doubt assumed that Zoro would be leaving him behind, “Kohza's agreed to take you back, get everything sorted, and keep an eye on you until I finish this.”

“W-Wait,” Sanji balked, glass coming down to the table with a tad too much force as a hint of betrayal and confusion slipped into his tone, “What?!”

“I told you,” Zoro repeated simply, using all of his willpower to keep his voice steady in an attempt to not let Sanji realize just how much this situation was tearing him apart inside. He also tried to keep in mind their company - who were clearly growing more uncomfortable by the second, “I'd get you home as soon as possible; like you wanted.”

“I mean... yeah,” Sanji agreed slowly, considerably put out as he recalled their initial conversation all those days ago back in Merryville, “but...”

Zoro's heart skipped a beat.

“What?” It was the simplest question, but it carried so much weight that Sanji probably didn't even realize. Zoro had thought he had been imagining it, but over the past week it had seemed like Sanji's irritation at the whole ordeal was waning. He had even been hopeful enough to consider that perhaps Sanji wasn't in such a rush to be sent home after all.

“These past few days have been the coolest, most exciting of my life!” Sanji exclaimed, casting a glance around the table as though to reference what he was referring to. Stussy having the grace to hide a far too knowing smile behind her drink as Sanji ranted, “And I work in emerg; do you know how much crazy shit I've seen?”

“I'd feel better if you weren't constantly in the line of fire,” Zoro argued despite the cathartic relief
flowing through him at Sanji's words, firmly reminding himself that it was for Sanji's own good. Scowling through his words as Zoro could practically hear Kohza smirking into his wine, “They don't want you; they want me.”

“Yeah, well...I want you too,” Sanji floundered in frustration, gaze wandering to the other guests as he was reminded of their presence and amended with a stammer, “preferably not dead.”

Zoro froze.

The words spoken were probably the closest to resembling any form of desire from Sanji towards Zoro. While his entire being was elated that Sanji was seemingly relaxed with being near him still, it didn't change the fact that he needed to get Sanji somewhere that wouldn't get them both killed. And if that meant that he had to start playing some dirty tricks… then so be it.

“Fine.” Zoro eventually grumbled, “Last time though. After this you are staying in the safest place I can leave you.”

“Deal.”

~X~

Pulling the strap across his bare chest a little tighter, Zoro gave a final shrug to ensure the shoulder holsters were sitting comfortably and winced as the left pressed against the bandages covering his still healing bullet wound. While Sanji's constant and careful attention had done wonders for it, the healing process was still a slow one and even though he was a little stiff, his mobility wasn't too compromised.

Snagging a gun off the bed, he released the magazine with a flick, scanned to ensure it was fully loaded before re-inserting it and sliding it into the holster under his arm. Doing the same with the second, he then closed up the clasps on each before grabbing the tunic from the bed. Carefully slinging his arms through and doing up the buttons, he gave a final glance in the mirror to ensure that both guns were perfectly concealed. Satisfied, he turned and made his way over to the large bay windows that served as a tiny balcony out of the small room.

Taking in the limited view that was given from the crowded suburban area as he took in these simple quiet moments he had to himself before having to get thrown back into the fray. These moments were few, and varied, and each time left him far more alone with his thoughts than he wanted to be at the moment.

It wasn’t long before there was a click of the door opening as someone entered, judging it to be Kohza by the cadence of his steps. Waiting as Kohza eventually met him at the window with a familiar reserved look on his face. Both standing in silence as he had a feeling he was about to finally have the conversation with the man that he had been dreading.

“You didn't really mean what you said, did you?” Kohza stated flatly, both of them staring down from the balcony to the bustling streets below. Vehicles rumbling along, pedestrians milling about, and the calamitous roar of the city drowning them out enough to keep anyone from overhearing their conversation. “About letting him stay after this?”

“ Nope.” Zoro murmured softly.

Kohza made a disapproving noise. Leaning forward to rest his hands on the railing before commenting, “He doesn't seem like the type that will take that news well.”

“Probably not.”
“You're planning on making me tell him,” Kohza grunted wearily, “aren't you?”

“Yup.” Zoro noted without changing his resigned tone that came with his decision. Sanji’s kind words unable to sway him as much as he would have loved to give in, firm in his choice to leave Sanji with someone else. It wasn’t a matter of how much faith Sanji had in him, rather how much he had in himself; and at the moment he was barely certain he could get himself out of this whole thing alive.

If the location of the bounty was encrypted to this extent, then the likelihood of the identity of whoever wanted him dead was not going to be good, and the chances of him going home were getting slimmer by the minute. None of this he would ever tell to Sanji, but he could already tell from Kohza's demeanour that he was as worried as Zoro was.

“Damn you...” Kohza grumbled through a chuckle. A small smile gracing Zoro's own lips before they were interrupted by a call from the doorway.

“Oi, mosshead!” Both men turning at the interruption as Sanji murmured through the door, “Stussy says we have to head out!”

“Chill out, Curly.” Zoro snapped, “We're coming!”

No bitten response let Zoro know that the blond was already long gone and the two men made their way across the room. Exiting and heading towards the stairs as a playful grin worked its way onto Kohza's face. Zoro's shoulders tensed as he already knew he was going to despise his jibes as much as he did Johnny and Yosaku's; it sometimes killed him being from a line of work with such perceptive people.

“Speaking of which...” Kohza began slowly, “Should I ask...?”

“Best not.”

Nodding in understanding, Kohza just muttered, “Tell me the story sometime.”

“There's nothing to te--” Zoro stopped short as they arrived at the top of the stairs and he got a full view of the blond waiting below chatting amicably with Stussy. Completely oblivious to their presence as Zoro's thought process ended abruptly at the sight of Sanji in the gorgeous blue Sherwani Kohza had lent him.

The long tunic fit snugly to the blond's body in all the right places and the golden silks matched his hair perfectly. The normally messy mass of curls was brushed neatly to the side in a professional combover and allowed you to see the man's eyes easily without bangs constantly in the way.

Shimmering blue embroidery curled across the entire length of the fabric in fantastic swirls and hypnotic curls, all of it highlighting the blond's enigmatic eyes in ways that had Zoro's breath catching in his throat. Sharp, sterling buttons seized the front of the jacket close across Sanji's chest and Zoro idly wondered how easy it would be to pop them free of their stitching if he hooked his fingers along the front and gave a firm jerk. Shaking off the sudden – incredibly unexpected and inappropriate thought – he dragged himself back to reality just in time to hear Kohza snort derisively.

“Tell me the story sometime.” Kohza repeated with a guffaw, patting Zoro hard on the shoulder as he walked around him. Zoro was still semi-lost in his world as he couldn't tear his eyes away from the blond and the haunting notion that after today he wouldn't be seeing the blond again for quite some time... maybe never...

TBC...
Have to thank @pansexualop (formerly @zosanlaw) for really helping me with this chapter! She gave me so much amazing and insightful information on India and I'm glad I could try and work in the culture and area as accurately as I could. I definitely couldn't have done this chapter without her! So huge thanks :D
Getting into the reception had been remarkably – and almost concernedly – easy, considering the high calibre people that were attending. However, with the amount of music and festivities taking place, amongst distant relatives, friends, and colleagues it was fairly simple to slip in unnoticed. If anything was going to give them away, it was the overly enthusiastic blond looking about the large reception with an unabashed gaze of awe.

Keeping the distracted man in tow, Zoro guided them through the large hotel that had been reserved for the event, keeping a keen eye out for the woman Coby had claimed he needed to find. Eventually making their way out into the extravagant garden in an outside courtyard, they found an even larger amount of guests milling about the aesthetically lit area.

Gorgeous flowers and finely trimmed shrubbery boarded the large area and endless amounts of twinkling lights lit up the twilight and cast a magical glow over the entire area. Tables where littered about with guests snacking and sipping on refreshments, multiple catering tables were to the right, and a dance floor took up the rest of the area.

It wasn't long before Zoro spotted the woman they had come to find, surrounded by guests and looking like a vision. Spangles and jewels hung from every inch of her, and the silks of her Lehenga were a vivid crimson that caught the attention of anyone looking in her direction. A finely Henaed hand reached up to swipe a stray strand of hair from her face as she nodded eagerly to the words a friend was speaking to her, eventually tittering in laughter.

Casting a critical look about the area, it seemed best that they didn’t draw attention to themselves by both going up to her at once. Not to mention if he was going to get into her good graces it was probably better if he talked to her alone. Zoro began making a beeline for her after muttering to Sanji softly, “Wait here.”

“Oi!” Sanji barked loudly, voice still horribly drowned out by the music as he caught Zoro's elbow in a tight grip. Zoro looking back at the blond as he wearily hoped no one had noticed Sanji’s slightly panicked tone, “Where are you going?”

Stuck in Sanji's hold, Zoro was forced to turn to look back at the confused blond and mutter
cheekily, “To congratulate the bride.”

“What am I supposed to do?”

“Just...” Zoro trailed off, waving a hand about the wedding vaguely, “enjoy yourself.”

As Sanji’s eyes lit up at the prospect, and Zoro retracted himself from the blond’s grip and made his way to Viola. Due to the crowd he wasn’t too nervous about letting Sanji wander, and thankfully at this point the blond knew not to go off anywhere alone.

Managing to slowly make his way through the crowd swarming the bride, it wasn’t long before her gracious attention was turned to Zoro. Offering his hand to her congenially, as he crooned pleasantly, “Congratulations.”

“Thank you.” Taking his hand, she returned the greeting as her cheerful eyes slid shut in a charming smile. However when they opened once more, there was a sharpness to them. Her grip tightened only for a moment in a threatening manner before releasing entirely as she murmured, “What can I do for you?”

“I’m looking for somebody.” Zoro stated as casually as possible, keeping his demeanour as amiable as possible, considering the amount of people present that always had their eyes on the bride at any moment. Hands clasping behind his back casually, he continued to watch her. Despite her innocent appearance there was a cold intelligence about her that was clearly overlooked by many people here.

“I know where a lot of people are, sweetheart.” She mused, pausing to give a sweet smile at an elderly relative walking by before continuing under her breath, “You’re going to have to be much more specific.”

“Law.” Zoro muttered, “I was told you’d get me in touch with him.”

Her motions stilled for only a moment before she was turning back to him with interest sparkling in her eyes, “And who told you that?”

“Kohza.” Zoro responded simply, having gotten permission from the man earlier that day to request them to meet at his house. Boldly crashing her wedding to get a favour was pushing his luck, but requesting through an old friend just might give him the edge.

Viola’s critical eyes scanned Zoro intently for several moments as she seemed to be mulling over the situation. Weighing her options before murmuring a dismissive response and turning away to return to her other guests, “I will make sure to pay a visit then, later tonight.”

A smug grin curled across Zoro’s lips, turning and heading back into the jubilant chaos of the wedding in relief that the exchange had gone so smoothly. Zoro ducked and weaved through tables and guests as he scanned the area for Sanji, intending to get them both out of here immediately. The music turned slow and romantic as he searched, the words making no sense to him but the singer had a deep voice and the lighting crew tuned the lights to set the mood. Taking in the impressive display on the dance floor, he finally spotted Sanji, happily taking part in the dancing and festivities as he politely escorted an attractive young Indian woman across the dance floor.

Remaining awkwardly off to the side, Zoro watched from the edge of the dance floor as part of him was immediately bitter over how easily Sanji could flirt with any woman he came in contact with. Though Zoro really couldn’t begrudge the man what came naturally to him; it was foolish to even think that the man wouldn’t have taken Zoro’s words as an open invitation to flirt like he always did.

Sanji didn’t dance with the girl the way Zoro might have expected; it had nothing to do with mutual
satisfaction or chauvinistic antics. Each movement, every sway, was meant to make the girl he was with feel like she was the only one in the room that could possibly deserve anyone's attention.

Handling her with the ease of a professional, he guided her effortlessly across the floor, turning, swooping, and spinning her as a sure grip on her hip and hand never wavered. A smile lit up her face as he would occasionally spin her in close for a moment of intimacy before once more pulling away to spin her gracefully. Long, dark hair swaying hypnotically with each of her movements. The song soon came to an end as he dipped her low and she was left staring up at him breathlessly.

Zoro turned away before having to be subjected to anything more, scowling as he tried to wonder what his problem was with falling in love with blond's that had a habit of flaunting around with other people in front of him. Averted gaze noticing a waiter walking by as the last of his resolve fell away and he raised a hand and flagged the young lad over.

“What can I get for you?” He inquired professionally, his cheery tone barely audible over the music and happy chatter as he leaned in to hear Zoro’s response better. If Zoro was going to break his clean streak, then he might as well do it the best way possible.

“Your best bourbon.” Zoro ordered, “Just bring the bottle.”

He seemed a little shocked at first, before nodding with a smile and making his way back to the catering tables and open bar. Zoro found a free table nearby and slumped into a seat as he assumed he might as well get comfortable, watching as the waiter returned shortly with a bottle of amber liquor. Zoro nodded in gratitude to dismiss him before cracking open the bottle and taking a large swig.

A small part of him was sickened with himself for giving in to the urge and drinking, but a large part of him was just so relieved to taste the strong, malty liquor that he had missed for so long. Loving the burning sensation in his gut that was beginning to numb some of the painful happiness that had been forced upon him ever since Sanji had forced himself into his life. He was nearly halfway through the bottle when Sanji finally abandoned his fun and made his way over to the table Zoro was sulking at.

“Oi. Oi.” Sanji commented with surprise as he neared, eyes falling to the bottle with concern, “I thought you were a couple years sober?”

“Yeah?” Zoro scoffed sardonically, not really in the mood for dealing with the blond's introspection on Zoro’s life at the moment, liquor loosening his tongue far more than it ever would have been while sober, “Well, it's been a rough couple weeks.”

Sanji had the grace to look a little guilty - even a tad hurt - as he took a seat opposite Zoro, and he couldn't help but remain a tad smug in his drunken stupor. Glad that the blond was conscious enough to notice that thanks to Sanji, Zoro wasn't exactly in the best condition. The blond's hands came up to rest atop the table as Sanji levelled on the man sternly, “That's a poor excuse.”

“So?” Zoro grunted, taking another sip as Sanji’s eyes tracked the movement of the bottle. Zoro could list several reasons from the past couple days alone that would warrant him picking up his old habits of alcoholism; one of them specifically being the infuriating blond sitting across from him at this very moment.

“You quit for a reason.” Sanji argued.

“You mean my cheating wife?” Zoro replied scathingly, tipping the bottle back to take another hearty swig before slamming the bottle back on the table. Resentment that had built inside him for years was beginning to bubble to the surface in an ugly form, “Or perhaps my condescending
therapist? Maybe my crippling trauma?"

Remaining unperturbed by Zoro's suddenly aggressive behaviour the blond pressed, "Why'd you quit?"

A dismissive noise grumbled out of Zoro's throat as he looked away with an unimpressed shake of his head. He felt annoyed at the notion that Sanji felt he had the right to make Zoro explain himself. Eyes flicking back sharply to find Sanji still watching him, hating that the blond could drag anything out of him with a simple look as he admitted through a slur, "Because it had become a crutch."

"What do you mean?"

"My life was over, my job, everything." Zoro shrugged easily, his nonchalance growing with every moment the alcohol affected more of his system. Speaking honestly about the darkness that had been haunting him for the past couple years more fluently than he ever had with his therapist, "It was the only thing keeping me from dropping dead."

Without missing a beat Sanji responded, "That's bullshit."

Zoro blinked owlishly for a second, thinking that he had misheard the blond as he grunted, "Excuse me?"

"Things didn't go your way." Sanji jabbed, "So what?"

Speechless, Zoro just stared – having not expected such a bold reaction from the usually flippant man – and certainly having not known the man would care about something that was simply a personal issue of Zoro's.

"Everyone's dealing with shit." Sanji muttered darkly, "Everyone has skeletons in their closet that they're trying to get rid of; you think you're the only one with problems? This is your life; your problem. You take the initiative to try and fix it; because it's no one's fault but your own."

"Fuck you." Zoro spat.

Sanji remained surprisingly firm in his opinion, leaning forward over his clasped hands as his eyes locked on Zoro fiercely. Zoro's hand retracting unconsciously on the bottle - not in fear - but in something eerily close to it as he had never seen this kind of heated decisiveness from the other man before.

"You've seen death; you've caused it." It seemed Sanji's rage over the subject allowed him to ignore Zoro's venomous comment and continue unfazed, "But I've seen the other side of it. I've seen the people that don't deserve it. The mothers that lost their children. And you're selfish enough to act like being alive is a curse."

"If I had given up do you think I would have fought for so long to still be here." Zoro snapped, mimicking Sanji as he too leaned forward and found himself rising to Sanji's bait, "I'm trying; you have no idea what I'm haunted by!"

"You think I'm not haunted?!" Sanji accused sharply, "That I'm not tortured every single fucking day by the people I couldn't save! By the families of victims that I had to deal with?"

A silence hung between them.

"You think I don't wake up screaming?" Sanji asked quietly, and Zoro had the respect enough to flinch at the comment, knowing full well Sanji was referring to the several nights he was awoken
screaming and covered in sweat, and even the few Sanji had gotten up with him and just stayed with him until he was able to drift back to sleep.

“You want to know the worst sound in the world?” Sanji asked softly, not even bothering to wait for Zoro's response as he continued on, “Cuz for me it's not gunshots... It's not pain, or crying, or screaming...”

“It's the ringing.” Sanji murmured so softly, Zoro could hardly discern it, the blond's eyes already shimmering with unshed tears as his trembling hand curled into a fist and he pushed himself on, “It's the ringing of a phone that's not going to get answered. It's the ringing of a phone and having to listen to it while knowing that the person on the other end is waiting for that phone to get answered... and it never will. It's...”

Sanji finally cut himself off as his own recollections seemed to be too much and he ducked his head to try and regain his composure. A fisted hand pressed against his forehead to try and ground himself as Zoro was left sitting across from the blond with nothing but shameful surprise on his face. Still trying to fully process the fact that without Sanji actually admitting it, the blond was dealing with just as much trauma as he was; maybe even more...

“We are all fighting demons,” Sanji managed finally, “but that doesn't mean life isn't worth living.”

Zoro sat speechless in front of Sanji, hand slack on the bottle of liquor that he now felt increasingly more ashamed for caving in and consuming. The bottle felt like a testament to his failure, and a beacon of shame for his weakness. Everything Sanji had said put things he had long forgotten into painful clarity.

“So here's what's gonna happen,” Sanji demanded calmly, lifting his head after it seemed he had managed to recollect himself. Zoro was still far too shocked to say anything as he watched Sanji wordlessly, “I'm going to go dump the rest of this down the drain, you're gonna sober up, and we're getting out of here.”

Zoro could only nod dumbly as he watched Sanji snag the bottle off the table and storm away to the bathroom. Watching him go until he became lost in the crowd, Zoro's eyes drifted out of focus in the wake of what he had just learned. A mixture of horrifying clarity and sickening shock took over him as he fully came to understand another side to the blond he hadn't even known had existed.

And suddenly an entire collection of memories flooded through him with the knowledge provided making everything clear.

The fact that Sanji only ever had his phone vibrate – or with a stupid, upbeat song in place of a ring tone – the way he almost imperceptibly flinched at the sound of anything close to a mobile trill. Not to mention the way the blond puffed on his cigarettes like they were a lifeline keeping him grounded...

Jumping up from the booth, he strode off in the direction Sanji had went, searching for the bathroom that took a ridiculous amount of time to find. Eventually locating it inside the building, he made his way inside with the full intention of finally responding to the blond and thanking him for his enlightening words; not to mention for sharing something clearly very difficult for him.

“Look, Sanji I...” Zoro trailed off slowly, glancing around the empty bathroom in confusion before noticing the broken bottle of bourbon on the floor by the sink and the amber liquid all over the grungy tiles. Sobriety hit him like a truck as a cold panic settled in and dread began sluicing over him.
Something about the situation felt horribly wrong.

It was then that his eyes landed on the single black Morjari he had seen Sanji wearing earlier that evening. Managing to stumble a few feet to his left, he barely discerned the wall he fell into before he was sinking to the floor and trying to regain some semblance of control. Blackness encroaching on his vision as the reality of what he let happen again sunk in.

Sanji was gone.

The terrifying mantra repeated over and over in his head as he could hardly believe he had been so careless as to let Sanji out of his sight again.

Sanji was gone.

And suddenly he was back in the military, covered in Kuina's blood as his limp body was dragged from the scene and down several flights of stairs. Shooting and pandemonium swirling around him until he was deposited rather roughly to the floor as everyone began to spring into action. Zoro still useless as he remained on his knees, staring hollowly at the ground while the image of her innocent face exploding before his very eyes kept playing out over and over. Slumped in on himself as a parchness grew in his throat and the only conscious thing he could do was fist the gravel before him as a dry sob was ripped from him.

A sharp pain brought him back to reality with a rush, as he looked down to find the dirt he had thought he had been fisting was actually shards from the broken bottle. Bits of the opaque fragments were embedded in his hand as trails of blood gushed from each wound to sluice down his arm and drip onto the floor. The sting was enough to keep him grounded as he began focusing on calming his breathing, and the haziness dancing around his vision managed to quell.

Shakily removing the glass from his hand, he began to steady his breathing as he forced himself to think rationally about the situation and what the best course of action would. Hardly getting a semblance of an idea before the creak of the bathroom door being pushed open altered him to someone's arrival, and the smarmy words let him know he wouldn't have to search very far.

“Heh.” Came a brutish chuckle from behind before remarking loudly, “He's in here.”

Finishing removing the last of the glass shards from his hands, Zoro slowly turned and pushed himself to his feet to face the large man standing in the doorway. An arrogant smirk was plastered across his portly face, hands raised as he began cracking the knuckles of one fist menacingly.

Glaring up at the man from under his brow, Zoro refrained from outright snarling as he undid the top button to his tunic just in time for the man to throw a quick jab. Deflecting it with a tilt of his head and a forearm he managed to get a second button undone – needing to get at his concealed guns and hopefully continue this fight in a less constricting piece of clothing – before the man was swinging a hay-maker.

Ducking under the wild swing, Zoro kicked in the man's knee before rising back up with his fists raised readily in front of his face. Not allowing the man fully finish his first scream of pain, Zoro’s fist was cutting the man off with a jab to the throat, followed by a second to the face as he snarled, “I don't have time for you.”

Sending the man tumbling backwards into the door, his colossal frame keeping the door propped open as it revealed several more men just beyond in the hallway looking from their coworker to Zoro. Sighing regretfully, Zoro stepped over the unconscious man as he continued to attempt to undo the buttons on his jacket. Many of the men were already beginning to draw their own weapons –
many with silencers on their guns in an attempt to not draw attention - as it seemed they weren't intending to make this easy on Zoro.

Not even bothering to give them a chance to explain themselves, or to get the upper hand, Zoro darted for the nearest one and only barely missed the shot fired. A searing pain to his arm let him know it had grazed, but it was all the guy was going to get as Zoro was now too close for a second shot. Hand coming up to cup the bottom of the gun, he jerked the weapon back to slam it directly into the thug's face, while a quick kick to the stomach sent him to the ground.

A ruthless bullet to the back of the head had the man falling limp, Zoro turning to do the same to one of the others before a familiar tremble began to take over again. Opting to empty the rest of the magazine, he tossed the useless weapon aside as he turned on the remaining four.

Disarming another man of his gun, he kept his arm in a tight lock as he spun around and whipped the into one of the other assailants faces. A pained squeal letting him know it had connected rather pointedly before he was turning back to the man in his hold and getting a firm hold on his hair.

Reefing his head back in time to smash his elbow into the man’s face and send him to the floor with a nose gushing blood. The tunic was annoyingly restrictive and he could already tell he had torn the seams around the shoulders – making a mental note to buy a new one for Kohza if he could get out of this alive.

Hands attempted to grab him from behind, tangling in the waist of his jacket as he turned and slipped out of the ruined fabric. Managing to get all the way free until the man only held the jacket and Zoro had the cuffs of the shirt in his hands, he jerked hard so the man stumbled forward and he was able to wrap both sleeves around the assailants throat and pull tight until all he could manage was a breathless grunt.

Spinning them both around, he turned the man in front of himself just in time for his comrade to embed a blade meant for Zoro deep into the other man's guts. Panicking, the man withdrew the blade while Zoro dropped the injured man to the floor and instead stalked after the still standing man.

Keeping the man forcibly confined with his arm and sleeve tangled around his head, Zoro wrestled the knife from his grip and sunk it into his body with three succinct stabs before immediately turning to whip it after the two men currently fleeing the fight. The blade sunk directly into the man’s back with a satisfying thud that sent him to the floor in a lifeless heap.

Barely getting a moment to catch his breath, Zoro finished dropping the bound man to the ground before his previously discarded jacket was being pulled across his face. The fabric cinched tight around his throat as he stumbled backwards blindly. It seemed like the man that had previously been stabbed had managed to get enough energy to get back up and try a second him.

Stumbling backwards with the currently wounded man, he waited until a poorly placed step had the man fumbling into Zoro and he dropped low. One arm reached across his chest to snag the man's lapel as the other came to wrap around his hip, leg shooting out to catch his inner thigh as he threw the man over him and into the ground with as much force as he could muster.

Surprisingly, the man did try to get back to his feet. Hands raised weakly as he swayed dangerously, a groggy expression on his beaten face. Huffing in annoyance, Zoro strode forward – not really having the time to waste with the stubborn fool – fist lashing out to connect with his face and sending him back and through the inconveniently placed window and the garden outside.

A shattering of glass broke through the uproarious festivities and immediately cut all conversation short as the only thing still audible was the music blaring distantly from the speakers. Horrified
crowd gazing down at the bloody man sprawled across one of the tables before up at the window where Zoro stood panting angrily. Not pausing to give a word of apology, Zoro was turning and sprinting off down the hall in the direction the last man went running.

He rounded the corner in time to see the thug dart into the elevator. Zoro ran as fast as his injured body could carry him – suddenly thankful for all those summer days Sanji had forced him to race around the lake – as he skidded to halt in front of the doors just before they slid shut. Managing to get his fingers wedged in the doors enough to pull them open to see a very frightened man desperately pressing the 'close' button.

The man whimpered in fear as Zoro stepped into the elevator with an unimpressed huff, letting the doors slide shut and effectively cut them off from the startled guests in the lobby behind them. A jerk had the elevator sliding into motion as it began to descend to the floor the man had already selected and a dark grin slid across Zoro's face, succeeded by a terrified sob from the man.

The doors opened onto the parkade with a sharp ding, and were barely open before Zoro was tossing the unconscious body of the beaten thug onto the harsh pavement and stepping out with gun drawn. Making his way out with cautious steps and wide sweeps, his sight landed on a rather wiry looking man wrestling a rather pissed off looking blond towards a vehicle, with a gun poised in hand.

"OI!" Zoro barked fiercely, marching forward with his gun raised and trained on the assailant as both turned to look at him when he called out. Annoyance graced the stranger's features while Sanji's lit up in clear relief as Zoro took in the ragged cuts and marks marring the man's face as it was clear Sanji had put up a fair fight.

"Ah. Ah." The man tutted tauntingly, readjusting his grip in Sanji’s hair with an aggressive tug that had the blond wincing unpleasantly. Barrel of the gun shoved pointedly into Sanji's temple, he rounded on Zoro to keep the blond as a shield between them, “Don’t get bold.”

Zoro paused.

Gun still raised and trained on the other man, he halted his footsteps so that they now stood several yards from each other, each eying the other carefully. In his younger years, Zoro wouldn't have hesitated in aiming for the man's still visible head - but considering the thug had something far more valuable to him - it didn't seem like a good time to be cocky.

There was also the unfortunate matter of the alcohol that was still affecting him far more than he had expected it would and he realized there was no way he could confidently take the shot without potentially putting Sanji at risk. While his shooting had improved the past couple months he wasn’t sure he could even make the shot on his best day without letting the stress get to him; he wasn't the man he used to be, he knew that.

“This is gonna go nice and easy Roronoa!” The man ordered angrily, “Heard through the grapevine that blondie here is your dead weight; so you're gonna back off nice and easy. Ya hear?”

Hands growing suddenly clammy, an idea occurred to Zoro - one he had never thought he would ever actually consider - but it was the only thing he could think of in the moment. With him incapacitated and the man very clearly having the upper hand, the element of surprise might just let them pull it off. However, if it failed then he would've just taken the biggest gamble of his life and lost.

“Sanji.” Zoro spoke very carefully, taking in a deep breath as he hoped to convince himself he wasn't making the stupidest decision of his life. Hands tightening their hold on his weapon, his eyes flickered from where they were trained on the other man to stare directly at the blond, “Don't do
Sanji stared back, fear apparent in his gaze but also a flicker of acknowledgement as he glanced to the gun pointed at his head and back at Zoro. An understanding passed between them and he seemed to know exactly what Zoro wanted him to do as his gaze hardened. Zoro nodded once, very carefully to confirm the blond’s thoughts as the assailant seemed to assume that the nod was merely a gesture of reassurance to Sanji.

Lowering his gun very slowly, Zoro relaxed his stance as he began to make a motion to toss his gun to the side, causing the other man to drop his guard ever-so-slightly at Zoro's surrender. It was all Sanji needed to take initiative, hand flying up to twist the gun away as his elbow came down to embed in the man’s gut. However, instead of pinning him to the floor with the gun trained on him, Sanji pulled the gun back and kicked the man hard in the ribs.

“I'm so fucking sick,” Sanji emphasized with a second kick, “of being taken,” Another vicious kick, “as a hostage!!!”

A final kick had the man keeling over and clenching his side as Sanji stood holding the gun in a trembling grip as he was clearly still in shock over what he had just managed to do. Zoro was not doing much better as he could hardly believe Sanji had managed to pull it off without being shot; clearly the guy didn't think Sanji would have any training what-so-ever.

Zoro strode towards Sanji swiftly, arm raising to train his gun on the other man and without removing his eyes from the blond, he pulled the trigger. A dull whistle hung in the air before a thud impacted the body. Zoro didn't need to look as the sound of the man's body falling limply to the floor was all he needed. Reaching Sanji, Zoro felt his gun fall from his numb fingers and didn't stop to think before embracing the other man with trembling hands.

They both sunk to the floor until the blond was seated on Zoro's thighs as he held onto Sanji desperately. One hand gripping the man around the waist mercilessly in his relief as the other had raised and was now hovering erratically near Sanji's jaw. Head dipping low between them as Zoro refrained from fully grabbing the man and pulling him to him like he actually wanted.

Even this was probably pushing it a little far but Zoro had never known such relieved desperation before in his life. All he wanted to do to attest to Sanji being real was grab onto him with all his might and never let go; run his hands over the man's body to affirm that everything before him was real before pulling him down by his neck and sealing his lips over the other man's to try and express even an iota of his gratitude at seeing him alive.

But of course he couldn't do any of that so he remained collapsed on the floor with the other man sprawled partially on top of him while he held his hands inches above the other man's skin, as though a touch would break him. A light touch to his forearm had him jumping minutely as Sanji's fingers just barely brushed across the skin there in reassurance. And Zoro couldn't help but wince in gratitude that the man was allowing Zoro this moment despite how uncomfortable it must have been for him.

“I... I'm so glad...” Zoro croaked painfully, his hand trembling as he could faintly feel the silky tresses of the blond's hair brushing against them and he had to fight the urge to tangle in the hair and never let go. A stiffness was beginning to take over Sanji that had Zoro forcibly withdrawing his hand and letting the clenched fist fall to his side lamely. Keeping his face turned away from the man to hide as much of the embarrassed flush lighting up his face as he could, “We should get out of here before the cops arrive.”

“You were right...” Sanji admitted while pushing himself to his feet, a grim look cast shamefully to
the side, “I shouldn't have come...”

“It’s not your fault.” Zoro assured as he too pushed himself to his feet. Hand coming up to rub the back of his neck awkwardly as he stood opposite the dejected blond, fumbling as he tried to console the man, “Everything’s fine.”

Confliction was clear on Sanji’s face, mouth opening to say something before a bewildered look took over and he demanded, “Wait... Why are you shirtless?”

Zoro hooked his thumb in the strap of the shoulder holsters as though it was all the explanation that was necessary.

Sanji’s bewilderment turned to exhaustive acceptance as he shook his head wearily and began undoing the buttons on his jacket. Zoro fought to keep his blush – that has just managed to wane – from returning full force as Sanji shucked off the tunic and extended it towards Zoro. Dressed now in his blue pathani and white kurta, he rolled his eyes, “At least one of us dresses like a civilized human being.”

Zoro didn’t rise to the jibe, however he did take the jacket and pull it on before they made a hasty escape out of the large hotel. Eventually blending into the crowd, they made their way back to Kohza's on foot, Zoro pointedly ignoring the fact that the Sherwani already smelt heavily of the blond.

~X~

There hadn’t been anymore complications on their return to Kohza's, however their arrival had been met with some concern as they had walked into the dining room looking decidedly worse for wear. Sanji's face looked far more ragged since the swelling had set in and his missing tunic didn't help with his dishevelled look, and Zoro had looked rather frazzled since he had spent most of the walk stumbling in a drunken stupor to walk off the damn bottle of liquor he had foolishly attempted to down.

After explaining the situation to a rather exasperated Kohza, they had both returned upstairs to deal with the aftermath of the evening. Sanji taking some time to clean and patch up the numerous cuts and bruises he had received from getting the bottle of bourbon smashed across his face. Once done he had graciously turned the area over to Zoro, who had immediately ran an ice cold shower in an attempt to fight off the last vestiges of his drunkness and wash away the smell still lingering on him.

He stayed in the shower for perhaps a bit longer than was polite, only now stepping out from the cool spray into the hot humidity of the summer heat. Slowly towelling himself dry, he was keenly aware that the moment he left the bathroom, he would be alone with Sanji for the first time since they had had their talk at the wedding and he wasn't sure how it was going to go.

Making sure to properly attend to his wounds before rebandaging them - it was best to do it right the first time so as not to give Sanji a reason to have to redo it and put Zoro through a different kind of hell - he started getting dressed and finally pulling on a ratty tank top, fingers pausing on the hem before heaving a sigh and stamping down his nervousness.

Steeling himself, he pushed open the door and made his way cautiously across the hall and into the other room, finding Sanji leaning against the balcony railing with a cigarette dangling from his lips. He didn’t move at the sound of Zoro's arrival which only put the man more on edge as he awkwardly shuffled over until he stood beside the blond, hands coming down to rest on the railing to keep them from sweating nervously at his sides.
“Look,” Zoro urged, voice catching as he coughed softly before continuing resolutely, “I want to apologize for my behaviour at the wedding.”

Sanji seemed taken aback for a moment, head turning so he could watch Zoro in confusion before a bit of clarity began to shine through on his face and quickly dismissed around the cigarette still clinging to his lower lip, “Hey, don't worry about it. You were drunk, and I-”

“No.” Zoro interrupted firmly, “I needed to hear it.”

Sanji had the grace to stay quite this time.

“I've been pitying myself for so long I forgot about everything else.” Zoro muttered quietly, “About what's important.”

“Anytime.”

“And apologize...” Zoro murmured softly as he could hardly raise his head to look at Sanji. He was painfully reminded that the blond was actually going through the exact same hell he was, although it seemed that Sanji had a tad better handle on things than Zoro had. “I didn't know...”

“I don't exactly advertise it.” Sanji shrugged from his position on the railing, shoulders lifting lazily before turning to look up at Zoro shrewdly, “Guess we're both a little stubborn like that, huh?”

Casting a sidelong look at the comforting look on the other man's face, Zoro felt the unease in his chest loosen almost immediately so he could respond in a breath, “Yea...”

It had never been like this with Kalifa; she had always been a helpful distraction, or a way to focus his attention on other more meaningful tasks to drive the dark thoughts away. But she had been a mild obsession compared to the burning desire he currently felt for the man standing beside him; it had never been like this.

It had never been this effortless.

It wasn't in what Sanji did, or said, or even the way he treated him; it was the unequivocal combination of everything about him that took Zoro's breath away just by looking at him. Sanji had a way of making the darkness fall away, leaving Zoro to bask in the reassuring safety of his presence; there was no struggle to stay in control, no anxiety that his concentration would slip, no fear over his dull unpleasant life.

Sanji made all of that insignificant just with his existence alone.

And call Zoro selfish, but he would defend that existence to the end of the damned earth if it meant he could remain this peaceful for the rest of his life. He'd be anything, do anything, just to keep this perfect ray of light alive until long after he had breathed his last breath, because if this is what Sanji could do for Zoro's miserable life, then he couldn't even begin to imagine what it had done for countless others as well.

Chest growing tight for a completely new reason, Zoro found his lungs locking as he remained poised beside the blond as those blue eyes watched him heavily. Saying far more than he had time to understand, and boring deeper into him than anyone else ever had.

All Zoro wanted to do was lean in and finally find out what it would feel like to place his lips over the other man's; no longer swayed by trivial thoughts of rejection, or gender. Just for a moment he wanted to know what it would be like to kiss someone with his entire soul as he tried to express even an iota of his love in a single motion.
Head dipping forward, watching Sanji's daring eyes, he found the distance between them closing far faster and easier than he had expected it to. Inches crept by as the motion became completely unconscious, something utterly foreign was pulling him to the other man.

Barely a breath apart, Zoro's eyes stared into unwavering blue that widened a fraction in surprise over what was about to happen. Nervousness dropped like a cold stone in his gut as Zoro pulled away hastily and jerked his head aside; far too afraid over what he had almost done to properly meet Sanji's gaze.

“Zoro.”

Zoro's head whipped to the side to see Kohza approaching, completely unaware of what had been moments from transpiring between the two men on the balcony. Straightening to face the man as Sanji slowly turned to watch the interaction as well, Zoro purposefully didn’t glance to see whatever expression could possibly be on the blond’s face - far too afraid to see the possible look of relief at being interrupted. It was clear from his surprise moments before that he had not been feeling the same tension in the situation as Zoro had.

“Hm?” Zoro intoned curiously, perhaps a little too desperately.

“Viola's here.” Kohza informed grimly, “And she's not pleased.”

Zoro grimaced, but at the same time was relieved he had an excuse to no longer be left alone with Sanji. Hand coming up to run through his hair wearily as he grumbled, “Right...”

Beginning to make his way out of the room, Sanji silently in tow, Zoro hoped that was a conversation he would never have to revisit again, instead focusing on the much more pertinent issue at hand.

Upon reaching the top of the stairs, Viola came into view standing haughtily in the middle of the foyer, dressed in simple jeans and top, hair tied up in a bun, with a very unimpressed look on her face. Watching with sharp eyes as they descended the stairs and waited only until Zoro reached the final step before snapping.

“You show up uninvited to my wedding, make requests, and then proceed to make a spectacle of yourself!” Viola mused with a livid tone before cracking a smile, “You are a bold man, Roronoa.”

“It was not my intention.” Zoro intoned apologetically as he finally came to a stop in front of the fuming woman, “Someone is trying to have me killed.”

“Clearly.” She scoffed. “You're just lucky half the people in my life are gangsters and are unfazed by that uncouth behaviour. My aunt is a little unnerved however.”

“I'll make it up to her?” Zoro slowly offered with an infliction to the end of his words.

“See that you do. And you. Darling.” Viola crooned with a moue of displeasure, sauntering past Zoro while heading towards Sanji with open arms, “I must apologize for the unsavoury way you were treated; I hate to think I let something so heinous happen to one of my guests.”

“Oh no, don't worry yourself!” Sanji behest with a quick wave of his hands, “You're far too kind.”

“Don't be ridiculous!” Viola pouted firmly as her hands came up to cradle Sanji's face, “If there's ever anything I can do for you; let me know. Alright, sweetheart?”

“Hah!” Sanji's cackle was more of a nervous shriek than an actual laugh, voice cracking as a blush
climbed up his face and his hair began to fall in a dishevelled mess on his face. An inhuman garble fumbling out as Viola leaned in with a playful smirk and stroked his bangs aside, tucking them behind an ear.

A notable pain had Zoro looking down to his hands where they were clenched in a white-knuckled death grip and were aggravating the cuts still marring both of his palms. Forcibly unfurling them as he once more had to remind himself that he had absolutely no claim on the blond and therefore nothing to be jealous of.

Grunting softly to interrupt the two, he politely prodded, “Law?”

Viola's gaze snapped back to him, hands finally releasing Sanji as she huffed, “Yes. Yes. Everything is all in hand. He's willing to see you tomorrow. Until then I suggest you lie low; there's a dead man at my wedding and police looking for you.”

“Thank you.”

“You know...” She huffed irritably, “You could have just called.”

“Would you have taken the job?” Zoro countered.

Lips falling into a thoughtful pout, Viola mulled over Zoro's words for several moments as Zoro watched her expectantly. Knowing for a fact that an anonymous phone call asking for her help would've been rejected immediately, and without actual proof of his situation it would've been even more unlikely. Heaving a sigh, she caved with a chuckle, “Very true.”

With that she began rooting around in her purse before pulling out a burner phone and tossing it to Zoro. He snatched it out of the air rather easily as Viola set about readjusting his purse on her shoulder before looking back up at Zoro pointedly, “If anything goes wrong call the number in the contacts; otherwise expect my call tomorrow when I will come get you.”

Zoro nodded in understanding, watching as Sanji was already readily leaping forward to help the woman to the door, still apologizing profusely for the mess Zoro had caused. Viola waved him off jovially as Zoro took the reprieve to check the number that had been set in the phone and committing it to memory in case of an unfortunate circumstance.

“Still going through with this?” Kohza inquired as he came to stand casually at Zoro's side while they watched Sanji and Stussy bid Viola farewell in the foyer. Zoro pocketed the phone silently as it seemed Kohza already suspected what Zoro's true plan was.

“Once I'm gone,” Zoro paused, making sure his words were spoken out of earshot, “Get him back to Merryville. Get all his finances in order – apartment, everything – and keep an eye on him until you hear from me.”

“I can already tell this is going to be a massive pain in the ass.” Kohza mused offhandedly before contemplating, “Although might be nice to be back in America for a bit...”

“Do you disagree?”

“No...” Kohza admitted carefully, remaining delicate with his words as he phrased his next bit slowly, “he obviously compromises you.”

Zoro nodded stiffly in agreement.

“I just don't look forward to having to take the blame.” Kohza admittedly simply, “He seems like the
fiery type.”

“He'll be pissed.”

“Are sedatives acceptable?”

“No sedatives.”

“Ugh...” Kohza bemoaned heavily, “It's like Brazil all over again.”

Zoro didn't say anything. Couldn't.

It was hard enough already forcing himself to leave the blond behind for the better, that his reservoir of smarmy quips was practically run dry. All he could think about now was getting this whole ordeal over with so maybe there was a chance he could return home and patch everything up. Maybe despite this whole mess and his feelings, he'd still be able to keep Sanji in his life; at least as a friend.

Kohza noted his silence with an accepting nod, instead asking, “When are you leaving?”

“In a few hours.”

~X~

All the excitement from the day had finally taken its toll on the blond paramedic - unconscious before his head had even hit the pillow. However, no such sleep could find Zoro as he lay awake on the makeshift bed next to Sanji's, listening to the cacophonous sounds of the city surging well into the night, barely drowning out the soft, steady breaths of the blond. Each soft sigh tore a whole new hole into his chest as he realized that their conversation over dinner that evening was the last one he would be having for a while, maybe ever...

As the time crawled later into the night – and Zoro was comfortable in assuming Sanji was deep asleep – he quietly pushed himself out of bed and began getting ready. Dressing in his gear as softly as possible, he then made the bed and grabbed his pre-packed bag of anything he thought he might need. Pausing in the middle of the room, he realized there was nothing else for him to do other than leave; and finding that the hardest task on the list.

Gaze turning to Sanji, willing his feet to carry him away but finding himself walking towards the man's bed instead, despite the voices in his head telling him not to. Staring down at the sleeping blond as his peaceful face only affirmed to Zoro that he was making the right decision, but also feeling it ripping him apart at the notion that this was finally it.

His knees buckled under the weight of what he was about to do, and the fear of not being able to do it without having Sanji there to anchor him and keep him sane. Falling to a seat on the edge of Sanji's bed, hands hanging between his knees hopelessly, a sudden calamity of words rose to his tongue despite his usually untalkative nature.

“I'm sorry.” Zoro choked out into the darkness, words coming out as a hoarse whisper, barely disturbing the hushed din of the humid room. Talking into the silence as it felt like he was at confessional, hands raising for a moment only to fall limp once more as he grumbled hopelessly, “I'm sorry for getting you into this mess, for forcing you to be a part of my life... This wasn't how anything was supposed to go...”

Finally finding the strength to raise his arms, he placed his hands over his face and rubbed at the weary skin while murmuring into his fingers, “I know you won't be happy... when you wake up...”
A hollow laugh got caught in his throat as he lowered his hands to once more stare into the darkness of the room, the chuckle nearly becoming a sob as he managed around the lump, “You'll probably be fucking livid...”

Turning his sights away from the shadows playing across the walls, he settled on the sleeping man who hadn't heard a word of his omission. Still snoozing calmly with an utterly peaceful look on his gorgeous face as Zoro mused around a heart-wrenching smile, “but I know you'll understand why I did this...”

Zoro found himself reaching out for Sanji's head, hand aching to run through the blond strands one final time. Unable to shake the haunting memory of that afternoon in Sanji’s apartment where it all began, when he had clutched the blond to him desperately and held Sanji's head to his shoulder protectively. It was so brief - and unfortunately interrupted by being tossed across the room in the explosion - but he could vividly remember each silk-soft strand that had rested under his palm.

Fingers trembling inches from Sanji, he slowly retracted them and pulled away. Forcing himself to his feet, he readjusted his jacket as he softly made for the door, pausing in the entryway to murmur back, “Bye... Curly.”

TBC...
Shot to the Heart
Stepping out into the humid night air, Zoro closed the door behind himself softly despite the fact that the deadbolt clicking echoed far louder in his ears than he had expected. That sound of the proverbial door being shut on his and Sanji's adventure, and the end of this oddly surreal time spent with the captivating man.

Forcing himself down the steps and to the street was a struggle, but each stride got easier until he was standing outside the vehicle softly idling by the curb. He threw open the door and fell into the passenger seat heavily as Viola watched him from her position behind the wheel. A predatory smirk on her gorgeous lips as he murmured, “Hey, you. Ready?”

Zoro gave a stiff nod.

After everything that he had just admitted aloud to Sanji – despite the blond being unconscious – Zoro still wasn't quite sure he could open his mouth without allowing his voice to crack. Far too much emotion still hovered near the surface that was threatening to spill out, and things he certainly didn't want to have to deal with while in the presence of this near stranger. While she was doing him a favour, it wouldn't do to have her see him break down now.

“Where's the cute blond?” She demanded petulantly.

“Not coming.” Zoro grunted, nabbing his seat belt and belting himself in as he was doing his best to avoid too much eye contact and this conversation. Adjusting himself in his seat, he turned his gaze
resolutely out the window despite the fact that Viola had made no motion to begin driving.

“Why not?”

“It doesn't matter.” Zoro bit out quietly.

“Listen, darling.” Viola crooned with a sinister tone, “I'm doing you a favour – a dangerous one – so when I ask a question, you answer it. Are we clear?”

Zoro's mouth opened to respond but found words completely useless as his throat began to close up on him. Memories of Sanji raced through his head as the full weight of what he had just done was hitting him. The fact that everything – even the small hope of affection he had suspected had been growing between them these past several days – was over.

Everything felt raw.

Like he had cried enough to spill all the tears he possibly could, and then some. Throat feeling like he had swallowed sandpaper, his eyes tender to the point of irritation, bridge of his nose itching with unshed emotion, and his chest a twisted, torment vortex of anguish that was slowly disrupting his ability to breath with every passing second.

“Yikes.” Viola intoned nervously, “Why do you look like I just dragged your dog out back and shot it?”

“Kohza's taking him back to America.” Zoro croaked out, “It was my fault; he was never meant to be here in the first place.”

“I don't understand.” Fingers drummed steadily across the steering wheel as Viola watched Zoro through narrowed eyes, “Would'n't he want to stay here with you?”

Zoro shook his head minutely.

“Wait...” Viola surmised slowly, a dawning conclusion causing her to frown as she pointed a finely manicured finger to Zoro's right hand where his wedding band was still prominently displayed, “You and him aren't...?”

“No.” Zoro managed out with a hollow laugh. There was absolutely nothing funny about what she had said, but the thought of him managing to be lucky enough to ever marry Sanji... well it was ludicrous enough to pull a chuckle from him. Eyes falling to the gold band, he was vividly reminded of whom it was promised to and the woman he had left behind.

“So you're married and he's here... why?”

Zoro turned a deadpanned look on the woman.

“Oh. OH...” Viola intoned in surprise as everything was clearly falling in place for her. Zoro was grateful since he wasn't in the mood to have to recount the entirety of his bad luck for the past couple months. “I thought there was a weird vibe between you two.”

“There's no vibe——”

“Course there is.” Viola countered dismissively as she finally threw the car into drive and pulled out of her parking spot. Easing out onto the night cloaked street, she mused, “You're married to someone and in love with someone else; it's gonna get weird.”
“I’m not--”

It was Viola's turn to gift him with an impatiently deadpan expression which was succeeded by a scoff, “Please...”

“I--” Zoro tried once more, a heated indignation flaring up inside him, but falling short as he realized there was no other way to put how he currently felt for the man; nothing that could possibly explain all his actions up until this point aside from the one Viola had so easily pointed out.

“Interesting~” Viola mused happily, looking far too pleased with herself for being able to drag as much information out of Zoro as she did while Zoro felt even more weary than he had when he had first left Kohza's.

“That good enough for you?” Zoro growled.

“Plenty.” Viola simpered, “Although I feel like you have a bunch of things you still need to work out-”

A sharp crack and the sudden shattering of glass interrupted the woman as both of them instinctually ducked and the vehicle screeched to the left as Viola lost control of the steering for a moment. The back window and front window had matching bullet holes penetrating through them, the glass cracking from the centre as their conversation was effectively ended. As Viola took the wheel again, another two shots quickly followed the first - one taking out the window and the other shredding the headrest of the driver’s seat, where the brunette’s head had been moments before. Hands still on the wheel, she drove with her head as low as she could get while still seeing over the dash, she turned to Zoro incredulously, “Friends of yours?”

“What gave it away?” Zoro snapped irritably, shuffling even lower in his seat as he began wrestling his jacket open to snag his gun from his holster. Cocking the weapon, he sent her a sideways glance, “Do a lap.”

“Are you crazy?!” Viola spat.

Zoro sent a dark glare her way, his earlier exhaustion gone, replaced by irrepressible rage that he hadn't realized he had been suppressing until this very moment. Every bit of painful longing, and repressed anguish bubbled to a head as he snarled, “Just do it.”

“Aren't you crazy?!” Zoro screamed as her hand fell to the hand brake and her other took a commanding grip atop the wheel. Engine roaring, she sped up towards the corner street up ahead, “Hang on!”

Engine revving louder as she weaved her way down the last of the street, Zoro had enough time to sneak a glance out the back window at the two cars in pursuit before Viola acted. In a single moment, she engaged the brake with a viscous jerk at the same time drifting the car into the side street with a sharp squeal of the tires and searing odour of burnt rubber.

Kicking open the passenger door, Zoro dove out of the vehicle into a single, well timed roll that had him coming back up onto his feet flawlessly as his gun was immediately raised and trained on the approaching vehicle. Without hesitating, he fired two consecutive shots- taking out the driver and the front tires of the approaching vehicle.

First car swerving dangerously before colliding with several parked cars, Zoro strode murderously forward, mind a blank slate of static for the first time in months. Pure instinct taking over in his rage, he fired several more shots to take out the driver and the front tires of the approaching vehicle.
Striding past the first vehicle that had now caught on fire, he blindly fired a couple shots to take out the men emerging from the back seat as he made for his other target. A man sat in the passenger's seat of the second car, struggling with his seat belt in a clear panic as Zoro strode forward and ripped open the door. Firing at point blank range, Zoro saw the whites of the man's eyes light up before going dim.

A sharp blow to the back of his head sent Zoro down onto a knee as he attempted to blink the stars out of his vision and the odd haziness that was starting to take over. Staying down a moment longer to make sure he could properly get his bearings before casting an unimpressed glance over his shoulder at the thug.

“Heh. Not so tough now are you, Roronoa?”

Pushing himself slowly to his feet, Zoro levelled on the rather large man with a scowl as the thug raised his hands readily to face off against him. Rolling his eyes in exhaustion, Zoro raised his gun and fired a single shot into the man's knee with a bored mein and watched with tired satisfaction as the man immediately fell to the ground with a pained wail.

As the man struggled to get back to his feet, Zoro walked forward and whipped the barrel of the gun across the man's face, sending him to ground again as the metal connected with a sharp crack to the thug's cheekbone. Popping out the magazine and inserting a new one, he brought the gun up to cock the slide before bringing it back down firing at point blank range, “I'm not in the mood.”

Body slumping over on the sidewalk as a pool of blood began to form under the corpse, Zoro regaining his breath as the sound of a car rolling up behind him had him turning abruptly and levelling his weapon on the driver. Seeing Viola's face, he lowered the gun as the car stopping and she leaned across the console to throw open the passenger side door with a snarl, “Get in already, you crazy bastard!”

Jumping in, Viola didn't spare a moment before she was taking off down the street leaving behind a pack of street dogs howling. Viola sparing no time in putting as much distance between them and that mess as she possibly could, but not before casting a teasing smile Zoro's direction, “That was fun!”

Zoro scowled.

“I'm kidding.” Viola intoned in exasperation, “Jeez, has anyone told you to grow a sense of humour?”

“Once or twice.” Zoro grumbled as he reloaded his gun before reholstering it, hating how his thoughts had immediately returned to Sanji and how it seemed no matter what he did it would be inescapable from now on. Gaze drifting out the window to where the sun was distantly beginning to rise, he knew Sanji would be waking up any minute now.

~X~

Viola pulled the car up on a nearly abandoned lot on the outskirts of a small rural town as they had managed to reach their destination without any more interruptions. It had taken nearly half the day to get there - and while Zoro wasn't about to question Viola's motives at this point - he was understandably weary upon seeing the suspiciously empty house.

They made their way up to the building that looked as though it was one strong gust of wind away from falling over, and Zoro watched as Viola proceeded to pull a ratty string hanging from the rafters above the porch. No sound was heard as they both waited calmly, Zoro silently wondering what
exactly she was waiting for but deciding to keep quiet and observe.

Several moments passed before a groaning of metal could be heard from within, followed by shuffling footsteps that slowly neared the rickety door. Zoro watched warily, one hand removing itself from his jacket pocket so he could readily have access to his gun lest things go bad. Listening as a lock was unshackled from the other side, the portal swung forward to reveal a man blinking blearily up at them.

Though he was probably no more than a few years older than Zoro, he stood with a lazy hunch and his hands buried deep in his hoodie’s pockets. A disgruntled expression was slapped across his sleep deprived face, the bags under his eyes making the man look like he hadn’t had a good nights’ sleep in weeks. His hermit-esque appearance was topped off with a matted mess of black hair smushed beneath a hit baseball cap.

“Viola.” The man grumpily mumbled towards the woman.

“How you been Law?” Viola crooned politely before gesturing towards Zoro, “This is Zoro; I’m doing him a favour for Kohza.”

Zoro stood calmly as he waited for Law to drag his gaze up and down him critically, eyes narrowing for a shrewd moment before conceding with a bored shrug. “Alright, let’s get you sorted.” Law grumbled warily as he turned and gestured for them to follow him further into his boarded up, condemned, shack of a house, “Sooner we get this done, the sooner you can leave.”

Upon getting further into the decrepit building, it became obvious that the noise he had heard earlier came from the large metal hatch currently sitting open in the middle of the floor. And judging from the flooring and carpeting attached to the top half it was meant to remain well concealed to unwanted visitors.

“So this house is a decoy?” Zoro inquired as his brow raised in interest.

“Of course.” Law scoffed, “You think I’d leave myself so readily out in the open?”

Zoro ignored the scathing comment and instead cast a glance down the hatch and to the holding area below. He was able to see a ladder leading deep into what appeared to be a bunker below ground, and several living essentials that were already in view, “What is it?”


Zoro made a noise deep in his throat.

“Just because your government hasn’t turned on you yet, doesn’t mean they won’t,” Law dismissed as he clearly picked up on the judging tone of Zoro’s behaviour. Smugly noting, “Though from what I’ve been seeing, you might already have them on your tail.”

“I need to change my bandages.” Zoro pointedly changed the subject, “Got somewhere I can use?”

Exchanging a glance with Viola, Law gestured to a door down the hall with a lazy wave of his hand, “Over there; don’t stay above ground too long.”

Zoro nodded shortly. “Got it.”

As Zoro began making his way towards the room, he heard Viola murmur, “C’mon, I’ll brief you on what he needs.”
In the grungy bathroom Zoro went about changing his bandages as best he could on his own - realizing he had begun to take for granted having a ride along paramedic. Cleaning and salving the scabbing mess that was his shoulder and hip, he slapped on another stick on bandage with a lazy smack. Rubbing it on enough that the glue wouldn’t catch on anything, he shucked his shirt and jacket back on impatiently.

Returning the medical supplies to his bag, he pulled a new burner phone from his bag and let the sack fall to the floor with a pathetic slump as he flipped open the mobile and punched in Kalifa's number. All the pieces were falling into place; Sanji was on his way back to America, Zoro was about to find out where – and potentially who – set his bounty, and he was practically days from ending this whole ordeal. Which meant it was about time he started focusing on reality and less on his foolish delusions regarding Sanji.

The phone trilled three times before there was a calm, yet wary answer, “Hello?”

“Hey...” Zoro breathed out the word on an exhale, allowing his shoulders to cave as the act of finally calling her had made him even more aware of his previous follies. While the love between them had fallen away months ago, he couldn't deny she had been there at a time when no one else had been, and despite her aloof behaviour he knew she still cared.

“Oh my god!” Kalifa gasped, “Zoro!”

“Shh.” Zoro hushed as soothingly as he could managed, “It's alright; I'm alright.”

“Where are you? What's going on?” Kalifa stammered nervously, “I got wind there's a bounty on your head; and you've kept silent for over a week! Do you know how worried I was?!”

“I know. 'M sorry.” Zoro murmured softly down the line, a genuine smile touching his lips at her concern. Perhaps living the rest of his life with her wouldn't be so bad... “I didn't want to risk it until I knew it was safe. You haven't had any trouble?”

“No. None.” Kalifa muttered, much calmer now as she urged sincerely, “I'm more worried about you; anything happen?”

“Nothing I couldn't handle.” Zoro shrugged off casually, ignoring the ache in his shoulder that flared up on cue as though to call his bluff. Tone growing quiet, he reassured her gently, “I should have this sorted in a few more days.”

“Okay... Okay.” Kalifa murmured nervously before becoming more resolute, “If you're sure.”

“I'll be back soon.” Zoro forced out cheerfully, hearing the lie in his tone so audibly it was nearly painful. Shoulders caving in and voice growing oddly small as he added, “It'll be like I never left.”

Right.

That's what all this was for, after all. Sanji should already be back home with Kohza, getting his new apartment set up and coming up with a plausible cover story for officials there; it was nothing he couldn't handle. And Zoro was going to finish up with the last of the mess here; which meant it'd be no time at all before he was back in Merryville like nothing had changed.

Old routine would start up again, and he would get back into his same old rut as he attempted to forget everything this trip had done to him and forced him to endure with Sanji. And Sanji – well Zoro still wasn't sure what Sanji wanted but it didn't seem too hopeless – him and Sanji would probably go back to being forced acquaintances.
“Babe?”

“Sorry...” Zoro shook his head to remove the weighted thoughts and conceded, “Just a little tired; distracted.”

“You... you'll let me know if you need my help... right?”

“Of course.”

“Stay safe.” She whispered softly down the line, “I love you.”

“I love you too.” Zoro responded on reflex, however now the words left an acrid taste in his mouth as he now knew for sure how much they tasted of a lie. Hating himself even more for what he was putting her through, her adulterous habits aside, he couldn't abide his own awful behaviour.

The call ended with a click, and as Zoro pocketed the phone he found himself fighting the whole new issue of his further complicated relationship with his wife. Heaving a sigh, he stared down at the dark mobile screen in defeat, even if she didn’t know anything about him and Sanji, it didn’t change the fact that everything wouldn’t be the same when he got back. At least not in Zoro’s eyes.

“Hey!” Viola snapped loudly, “Wedding crasher!”

Zoro rounded on her with a weary gaze.

“You're in luck.” She claimed with a grin, beckoning him with a wave, “Law says he found something useful.”

Following the woman back to the hidden hatch, Zoro dropped down into the area as Viola followed shortly behind after finally closing the hatch and firmly locking it behind her. Staying on his guard, Zoro took in the impressive area Law had set up for himself.

Indeed it appeared as though the inside of a submarine had simply been remodeled into a rather cozy living quarters; complete with a spacious common area, a well stocked and tidy kitchen, and even a bedroom with a separate hall. Aside from the metal walls with large bulbous rivets and the wall of dirt visible through the portholes present along the walls, the place would appear like a totally normal bachelor suite.

Zoro made his way over to where Law was sitting comfortably with the same setup as Khoza’s intel room - though there were a handful more servers and monitors. Sipping on a mug of coffee, Law stared at the multiple programs he had running simultaneously, and without even bothering to wait for Zoro to speak, started explaining irritatedly.

“Okay, so from what Viola told me your boy was able to get past the double VPN that was put in place to throw most agencies off their trail,” Law gestured towards his monitor which was displaying a map fairly similar to the one Coby had pulled up at Kohza’s, “and he ended up with something like this, correct?”

“Yeah.” Zoro nodded simply, arms coming up to cross over his chest carefully, “Couldn’t get a location beyond that.”

“Well he wasn’t wrong, because they were all sent from these places simultaneously, or rather that's what it's supposed to look like.” Hand striking several keys, the image was sent from his computer to a larger monitor on the wall. Law pushed himself out of his chair and strode over to it while tapping his pen on several of the European locations lit up across the screen. “Theeese all were uploaded at the same time with the identical content of the bounty for your head. However, theeese were all
actually loaded several seconds apart from the initial upload; though the discrepancies are most likely inconsequential."

Zoro simply shook his head with a small shrug to show he had no idea what the man was getting at.

“Most likely the bounty was stored in a shared cache before it was accessed simultaneously via alternate servers and then was uploaded at the same time.” Law explained wearily, “I’m assuming whoever did this knew you would try to locate the original bounty and decided to make it difficult for you.”

“So I’m back to square one?”

“No.” Law sighed heavily as he rounded on Viola with an exhausted expression, “Did he not listen to a word I just said?”

“Easy, darling.”

A disgruntled huff came from Zoro as Law rolled his eyes in exasperation.

“Anyway, I can't find the cache, but the shared copies are all traceable as being copies. The only original document came from here,” Law finished his spiel by tapping his pen against the monitor behind him as it landed on a glowing dot right off the coast of the Mediterranean. “That, would be the sight that uploaded the original bounty.”

“Not bad.”

“Not bad' he says.” Law scoffed, dropping back into his chair and swivelling it around dramatically as he turned to face his monitors once more, “You're a piece of work.”


“As for the address of origin; it came from the Blue Nose Pub.” Law announced to no fanfare, pulling up a random photo of the outside of the building and sending a sideways glance at Zoro, “Ring any bells?”

“Not particularly…”

“Let me see if I can grab any interior photos…” Law murmured to himself rather absently as began dragging several located photos up on the screen for them to see. The interior of the bar completely unremarkable as it had all the decor of a regular pub; cheesy ox horns hanging above the counter and all. Though there was something oddly recognizable about the bar top in one of the photos… “How about now?”

“Vaguely…” Zoro murmured through a frustrated scowl, he wasn't certain whether it was the angle or the quality of the photos but he just couldn't understand why he found the place so familiar. Absolutely no memories of the place, just the barest hint of deja vu while staring at the bar top, as though it was something out of a dream long ago.

“Well…” Law mused shortly, “I could cross reference upload time with security footage and see if that turns up anything.”

“You won't find anything.” Zoro slowly shook his head as a bad feeling was beginning to grow in his gut, having spent enough time dealing with stuff like this that even he could see a subtle invite for what it was. It was just a hunch, but the fact that the place was eerily reminiscent did not bode well for him, “Whoever set this bounty wants me there...”
Viola pulled the car up into a spot on a street just a few blocks away from Kohza's apartment that would ensure no one would be following them as Zoro stiffly pulled himself from the vehicle. The events of the past couple days were really taking their toll on him; shoulder growing stiff without Sanji's attention and his other injuries still needing time to properly heal. Wearily snagging his pack off the floor and slinging it over his shoulder, he leaned further into the car and noted, “Enjoy your honeymoon.”

“Oh, I intend to.” Viola huffed, her playfully annoyed tone obviously forced, “After the heart attack I nearly had dealing with you, I might even try to extend it.”

“Thank you again.” Zoro grunted sincerely, “I'll make sure to make it up to you after this whole thing is over.”

“You really want to do me a favour?” Viola murmured rhetorically, “Start looking after yourself; you look like you're suffering from a three year hangover.”

“I…” Zoro fumbled for a moment, averting his gaze, “I'll try…”

Shaking her head lightly, she threw the car into drive while giving a teasing wave farewell, calling out as she began to take off down the street, “Give Sanji my best!”

Zoro gave a final wave before turning and making his way back up the streets as cautiously as he could, the walk feeling a tad longer than he had thought it would be, but with the several blocks he had got turned around at, he was certain that at least no one was following him. He managed to reach Kohza's where he could vaguely see a light on in the dining area that was likely from Stussy, painfully reminded that at this point Sanji and Kohza were long gone.

Rubbing a hand across his eyes wearily, he pushed into the building as he found his mind already turning back to the blond man with treacherous and depressing thoughts.. He barely got the door closed before there was a sharp skidding of wood on wood and then a loud clatter.

“YOU!”

Zoro's head whipped up at the murderous snarl that was bellowed upon his arrival, finding a very livid Sanji standing at the dinner table with an accusatory finger extended in his direction. Completely caught off guard by his presence as Kohza had supposedly taken the blond home hours ago – though from the sheepish look Kohza gave it hadn't exactly worked out. Stussy however was smirking around her tea like she was about to witness the best show of all time.

Panic had Zoro backing out of the room with wide eyed swiftness as he did his best to make his way to the stairs and to his room even as he heard Sanji storming after him. Loud stomps indicated that the man was actually running after him which instilled more fear in him than anything else that had happened in his life. Even as he raced up the stairs, he could faintly hear Stussy's amused comment of, “That's the first time I've seen him that terrified.”

“That's the first time I've seen him run from a fight.” Kohza agreed on a bewildered chuckle. Zoro ignored both of them as he continued to run as fast as he could from the demons at his heels. Landing on the second floor, he bolted to his room with Sanji close behind and screaming bloody murder.

“Where are you going?!” Sanji bellowed after him, before trying once more with far more indignation in his tone, “HEY!”

Zoro got to his room just as he heard Sanji land at the top of the stairs, striding inside, he slammed
the door shut firmly and let his back fall against it heavily. He had not at all been mentally prepared for the fact that Sanji might have still been here, and certainly not ready for the fight that was about to entail.

When Sanji's fist connected with the door as he pounded against the wood, Zoro could feel each furious thump as the blond demanded, “I'm talking to you!”

Zoro considered jumping from the window but the thought itself made him realize how crazy he was acting. His hand tightened nervously on the strap of his bag before releasing in defeat. There was no way Sanji would give up and let him be. Caving in, Zoro slowly turned and opened the door to find a seething blond giving him a murderous glare on the other side of it. Teeth bared and face flushed, Sanji pointed an accusatory finger at Zoro and shouted, “What the FUCK are you up to?!”

“So, Curly?” Zoro tried weakly.

“Don't you 'Curly' me!” Sanji threatened with a brandished finger, shoving past Zoro and storming into the room as the man just stood by the still open door nervously, wondering if he could maybe just run outside and barricade Sanji in the room and make a quick get away.

“What the hell?!” Sanji demanded immediately, arm gesturing indignantly at the door as he was clearly indicating what had just taken place... as well as no doubt being left behind.

“I could ask you the same thing.” Zoro countered tiredly, closing the door slowly, not entirely in the mood for dealing with Sanji's explosive nature at the moment.

“Leaving me here with him?” Sanji balked indignantly, gesturing aggressively towards the door, “What kind of bullshit are you trying to pull? I thought we agreed I could stay!”

“You're safer with him.” Zoro attempted wearily, not even able to muster the energy to be annoyed at Kohza for not following his orders and taking Sanji home. Unable to force any real emotion into his argument, his shoulders sagged under the exhaustion plaguing him, “I can deal with the rest of this on my own.”

“Like hell.” Sanji scoffed, “And what happened to you saying I could stay! You're lying to me now?!”

“I'm not lyin--” Zoro tried again weakly.

“Bullshit!”

“I'm trying to get you home!” Zoro exploded suddenly, an anger he had hadn't realized he had been harbouring surging out of him as he seethed back through gritted teeth, “You were the one that was livid over the inconvenience I caused you by having to bring you along; now you're pissed I'm trying to send you back! Could you be any more fickle?!”

“I thought I made it pretty damn clear that I changed my mind!” Sanji bellowed back, his anger having not wavered in the slightest, and if anything seemed to only thrive on Zoro's reactions.

“You also made it pretty damned clear that you weren't interested in me!” Zoro shouted, hating that he could hear the faint cracks in his voice as he was beginning to break. All the emotion and pain finally leaked through as he found himself talking about things he had promised himself he would never bring up with the other man, “So why are you still here?!”

Because that was the real issue here; wasn't it?
After everything that had happened and all that Sanji had learned and seen while in Zoro's company; why on earth was he still wanting to stick around? Why would he keep torturing Zoro with his presence when he knew how Zoro felt about him? And why would he keep stubbornly risking his life when Zoro had finally given him a safe way out?

It made no sense.

Sanji's face contorted in indignation, “When the hell did I say I wasn't interested?”

“Um...” Zoro hummed with a sarcastic viciousness, “My apartment. When I was trying to drag your whining ass to Japan.”

A frown of confusion graced Sanji's handsome face before being replaced with a stark look of understanding until it was back to livid disbelief, “Oh my god, you dense idiot! I fucking like you; how on earth do you not get that?!?”

Everything screeched to a resounding halt as a pin could have been heard dropping in the silence that followed the blond's irritated confession. Zoro's shocked eyes locked with fiery blue as they both stood off against the other with only their breathing and the distant sounds of traffic breaking the tension. The meaning of Sanji's words seeped through him with heart-stopping slowness as Zoro was certain he must have misheard.

“B..But...” Zoro managed with a breathless wheeze, too shocked at the reality of what Sanji was saying and the incredulity of it that he was still attempting to rationalize his previous thoughts. Grasping desperately at their first – and only – conversation dealing with all of this, he floundered, “You said...”

“I wasn't saying that I wasn't interested!” Sanji barked with a nearly hysterical laugh, extending a hand in a wave of frustration, “I was saying that I can't do anything about it while you're still married!”

All the confusion came to a chilling front, the rushing in his ears going completely silent as Zoro was finally able to turn to Sanji completely calm. Everything felt completely frozen in time as the events of the past week began playing before him from a horrifying new perspective and he wheezed out softly, “...what?”

“Your wife?” Sanji prodded with an air of mockery, “The woman living in your house that was somehow less important than me to deserve getting kidnapped.”

“...oh.” Zoro finally managed quietly, the word shrinking as he began curling in on himself in embarrassment of the misunderstanding. Everything suddenly clearly falling into place; their original conversation playing over in his head with the sudden new context and making himself feel like a fool.

“How the hell could you think I wasn't interested?” Sanji balked in confusion, “I was throwing signals left and right; I knew I was a piece shit for being into you but I couldn't exactly help myself.”

Zoro said nothing. Couldn't.

“Besides, I was pretty sure you were straight so I was damned surprised when you confessed to me.” Sanji admitted with a tad of shame gracing his features, hand coming up to rub the back of his neck guiltily, “I'd like to blame the shell shock, but I honestly think it was just me reacting like a shitty idiot.”

“Why didn't you say something?” Zoro asked hollowly. Still trying to process all the information,
knowing he should be ecstatic but unable to illicit the emotion after having resigned himself to rejection for so long. Part of him still felt like this must be some massive joke the blond was playing on him.

“I tried!” Sanji implored earnestly before curling back into himself with a regretful moue, “But every time I did you changed the subject; I assumed you were angry at yourself for feeling that way. That you hated me for it.”

An icy silence followed the statement as both men remained standing silently opposite each other as each processed the new information they had been given. Zoro was growing increasingly more hysterical than Sanji however, and the blond’s final confession.

“Are you joking...?” Zoro croaked out in livid disbelief, indignant over the notion that Sanji would even think something like that about him. Blinking incredulously, he glanced around the room in insulted awe as he tried to formulate any words that weren't going to come out as angry nonsense, “Do you have any idea...”

Cutting himself short with a hand clamped viciously over his mouth, he squeezed his jaw pointedly before allowing the hand to slide away as he tried again. Both hands shaking worse than he could remember, his mind a jumbled mess of exhilaration over knowing what Sanji felt for him, and chagrined fury over the idea that Sanji would ever think he would hate the blond for something so unbelievably stupid.

“You...”

Again falling short as nothing conceivably coherent could possibly come out of him, that would make a lick of sense. Sanji had the grace to look guilty as he wearily watched Zoro fume over this new information, while also having the intelligence to remain silent.

Finally looking up at the blond with enough resolve to not get distracted by his enchanting features, nor the newly realized feelings between them. Zoro was able to get a handle on his hectic thoughts long enough to point an aggressive finger at the man and accuse childishly, “You're a fucking moron.”

Sanji was genuinely shocked for a moment – blue eyes innocently wide – as it seemed he had not at all expected that as Zoro's reaction. But it was soon replaced by his own indignant scowl and he was taking an aggressive step forward while rebuffing, “Oi!”

“How could you think that...” Zoro demanded hoarsely, looking anywhere but at Sanji as he tried to summon the verbal capacity to reprimand the idiotic man the way he wanted. Pain surfacing in his words as he choked out in an angry grumble that slowly trailed off, “How could you think I...”

Infallible words escaped him as his disbelief crashed with his crushing reality of just how much Sanji meant to him and how incapable he was of explaining it. Sanji had hung the stars to cure of him to his fear of the night, and he was unable to express even an iota of it with words alone. Words didn't feel like enough.

“I told you how I felt!” Zoro accused, anger bubbling up in place of his fumbling inability to express himself. Guilty over not being able to keep a level head but still lividly indignant over the nerve wracking ordeal he had been through the past week because of Sanji's ineptitude, “Did you... you think I got shot because I felt guilty?! Because of some martyrdom I had over liking you?”

“Fine!” Sanji finally bellowed to cut Zoro off, arms thrown up in defeat as he admitted headly, “I'm a fucking moron; happy?!”
Zoro just gave gruff huff. He clearly wasn't.

“You confessed and I fumbled like a shitty idiot.” Sanji fumed, “I was given the perfect opportunity and instead of just taking it I said nothing! You were clearly in pain and I shut myself in like a coward! I messed up! I hate myself! Is that what you want to hear?”

“NO!” Zoro growled indignantly, “Haven't I made it clear that I don't want you getting hurt?!”

“Well, what do you want?!” Sanji snapped, “How can I make this right?!”

“I just... want you...” Zoro murmured hoarsely, “happy.”

Once more, a rare moment passed where Sanji didn't speak, instead listening intently to Zoro's broken words.

“And if that means getting you home, then I'd do that.” Zoro stated with intense conviction, a confident step bringing him closer to the still shockingly silent blond, “If I had to remove myself from your life; then I'd do it in a heartbeat. As long as you're happy I don't care; I'd do anything... Whether that meant letting you be with someone else...”

Zoro realized he was rambling and let his words trail off hopelessly, not entirely sure where he was going with the ridiculous monologue, but knowing he needed to get his final point across. Breathing becoming tense, he was horribly aware of how close he was to Sanji.

“Or...” Zoro croaked out on a raspy breath, body unfalliably steady for how much he felt like his insides were shattering to pieces. Walls he had built up for years crumbled away, he felt completely stripped bare before the other man as he admitted things he had still been having trouble admitting to himself.

Trembling breath stuttering out over dry lips as he slowly raised his hand towards Sanji's limp one, nervousness beginning to show in the faintest of shivers running the length of his arm. Middle finger twitching for the faintest of moments to flicker across the back of Sanji's hand which didn't pull away, allowing Zoro to continue moving forward to gently place his hand over Sanji's.

All of his focus zeroed in on Sanji's hand and the skin beneath his fingertips, the bony knuckles protruding up to brush against his calloused palm, and the warmth radiating through the sacred appendage. Unsure why the simple gesture felt so monumental, Zoro had to stifle a nervous inhale as he finally raised a vulnerable gaze to the man watching him so intently. Blue eyes wide and curious – not judging – but also not responding as he was clearly waiting on Zoro to continue with what he was intending.

“Or... with me...”

Hand twisting around to grab Zoro's wrist in a vice-grip, Sanji was jerking Zoro forward into a painfully intense hug. Arm around his shoulders trapped him in place as another around his waist kept him pinned to Sanji's body. His own hands hovered awkwardly behind Sanji as he was caught off guard by the sudden motion and what it meant. Slowly, he allowed them to fall to the small of the blond's back as Sanji groused into his shoulder.

“Definitely with you.”

Knees buckling for a heart stopping moment, Zoro caved into the other man at the intense relief that came with Sanji's words. A weight Zoro hadn't even realized he had been carrying tumbled from his shoulders and it felt like he was standing free for the first time in years. The only thing keeping him earthbound was Sanji's currently desperate hold on him.
Hands shakily pulled away from where they rested in the small of Sanji's back, moving to cradle his hips in his hands and get used to the feeling of holding someone much broader and thicker than he was used to. Waist still fairly tapered, but with an enormous added rigidity of muscle tone that he had never felt before when holding a woman. It was different, but not bad, and he found his hands aching to explore more.

Slithering higher as he felt the corded muscles of Sanji's sides through the fabric, the powerful flex every time he breathed in – a pleasant reminder that the man was still alive, that Zoro still had him. Coming around higher to trace up with sharp bones in his back before reaching the blond's neck, fingers trembling as they slide from shirt to bare skin, totally unprepared for the heated warmth that he met there. Unable to stop himself once there as they travelled higher.

Fingers tangled in blond hair he had dreamed about – fantasized about – that was even softer in his weathered hands than he had ever expected. Silky tresses falling between his fingers and curling around his hands as they tightened and he pulled Sanji closer to him. Cradling his head against his shoulder, he nuzzled into the blond curls below Sanji's ear and simply allowed his forehead to rest there amongst the warmth and curls trailing across his face.

The world had stopped turning for all he could care as he just wanted to remain with Sanji finally in his arms until the whole damn thing fell apart. Bounties and marriages, and all other things were insignificant compared to finally knowing that Sanji felt the same as him. All these tumultuous emotions were not just one sided, and maybe – just maybe – after Zoro cleaned up this whole stupid mess they might just stand a chance.

After long moments, Zoro eventually felt a soft murmur against his shoulder which had him releasing the blond enough to let him pull back and speak. Confident as ever, the blond stared him straight in the eye without any trepidation, a single line creasing his brow in a frown as he intoned seriously, “I'm sorry.”

Zoro could already feel his face contorting in confusion at the blond's admission, mouth opening to retort only to have Sanji's slender finger press to his lips firmly. Thoughts derailed, Zoro tried to pay attention to the blond and not let himself become distracted by the feel of the calloused tip pressing against his lower lip; and the weird urge he had to dart his tongue out to taste.

“I realized I didn't say that properly, so...” Sanji fumbled, hand pulling away just enough for his fingers to retract nervously, “yea...”

Zoro hadn't thought his heart could ache anymore than it already had after finally getting Sanji in his arms, but the blond had a remarkable way of constantly proving him wrong. Such an open and apologetic expression warped the man's face into something soft and vulnerable that had Zoro pretty sure he wasn't going to be able to breathe properly ever again.

Swatting Sanji's hand away, he pulled the blond back into him again in an attempt to stop his chest from trying to cave in on itself. Hand tightening in silken blond tresses, he pulled the man in as tight as he could manage, “I'm sorry too.”

“Hm?” Sanji grunted in confusion.

“I'm sorry I made you think I was angry with you.” Zoro amended with a childish murmur into Sanji's shoulder. Allowing himself to nuzzle into the fabric for the first time and fully enjoy being able to embrace him. Breathing in the intoxicating smell of cigarettes and musk before breathing out heavily, he added snidely, “It's just how my face looks after getting shrapnel in my side.”

“Hmpf.” Sanji made an unsightly snorting sound into Zoro's shoulder, his arms tightening around
Zoro while muttering playfully, “I forgot you had a sense of humour.”

“Only for you.”

“I can't tell if you're being sweet, or insulting my sense of humour.”

“A bit of both?”

“Seems about right...” Sanji trailed off quietly, watching Zoro carefully before inhaling with a nervous breath, “What happens now?”

In a single moment, Zoro was fifteen years old again and his cheeks were lighting up like a damned stoplight as the slight intonation to the blond's words caught him off guard. Knowing that it was not what Sanji had at all intended, but was unable to stop his mind from linking their current embrace to several other unsightly things that had been growing in the back of his mind for weeks.

“Wow...” Sanji mouthed slowly, eyes widened massively as he took in Zoro's blush, “That's a new look.”

“I...” Zoro stammered out hopelessly, hating the way Sanji's entertained smirk only grew wider as Zoro's panic increased. Noting that Sanji's hold had tightened enough that Zoro couldn't exactly run away, babbling as Sanji leaned in with a predatory grin, “I - I know where the bounty was posted!”

Sanji blinked owlishly, clearly not expecting that response, but going along with Zoro's change of pace easily – however Zoro had a suspicion Sanji wasn't going to let Zoro forget the conversation any time soon. Instead, Sanji tilted his head curiously and noted teasingly, “Really? Does that mean I'm allowed to stay, or is this your way of telling me I have to leave?”

“Letting you stay,” Zoro paused with a wary wince and a thick swallow, “would be against my better judgment...”

“No offence,” Sanji began cheekily before leaning in with a shrewd smile. Their playful banter was able to rid Zoro of his momentary embarrassment as he became far more interested in the blond’s face and how he was only just now realizing how close it was to his own, “but I just got you; you think I'm going to let you get rid of me now?”

A fond chuckle shook Zoro’s shoulders as he found himself being pulled in, eyes unable to tear away from hypnotic blue as he chimed in softly, “You think you can stop me?”

“Pretty much,” Sanji goaded with a shaky breath. Zoro felt the heat of Sanji’s exhale on his lips as they parted eagerly, aching to know what it would taste like.

“Uh... Sorry.” Sanji hummed nervously, head dropping forward so the blond bangs brushed lightly across Zoro's lips while he was left looking down at the man in confusion. The paramedic's hands tightening in regret as he muttered, “You're still married. And I can't besmirch a woman in such a manner.”

The breath Zoro had been holding in before their almost-kiss refused to exhale properly, and Zoro was left to grasp awkwardly, “You know that she cheats on me.”

“Don't care.” Sanji murmured softly to the floor, remaining in Zoro's grasp and keeping his head
tucked against Zoro's shoulder, “It isn’t right.”

A tender smile touched Zoro's face and he allowed his head to tilt and rested his cheek on Sanji's head, arms coming up to embrace the blond in a gentle hug. One hand coming to cradle his shoulder, the other swept low to wrap carefully around his hip as he found himself immediately at peace once more - kiss or no. “I'd expect nothing less.”

TBC...
Keeping Track

Chapter Notes

A/N: Two notes;
1. Most trains in Europe are pretty standard and can travel from speeds of 80km/h to 160km/h (and higher). For the sake of this fic they are travelling on a relatively older train. Cuz I want train dramatics and you can’t have train dramatics on a high-speed train.
2. You are totally NOT allowed to smoke on trains in Croatia, but in this fic it’s an older train and we’re gonna make it okay for the sake of the story lol Anyway, onto the fic...
A salty breeze drifted across the summer drenched city as Zoro found himself standing in the designated smoking area outside the train station with Sanji. The Croatian vacationing port was a bustle with tourists and seasonal travellers - giving them a fantastic cover while Sanji satiated his habit after their long flight - and allowed Kohza and Stussy time to procure their tickets.

Hand nabbing the front of his shirt, Zoro tugged with a few lazy jerks at the fabric in an attempt to generate a bit of relief on his flushed skin. Thoughts hazy as the Mediterranean sun beat down on his head and made not only his mind, but his body lethargic as well. Tired eyes shifting behind his shades to turn from the view - sailboats dotted the horizon as they skittered across the glittering water that reflected the high afternoon sun - and instead onto the blond beside him who was still taking in the sights.

Releasing a happy puff of smoke, Sanji flicked the butt of his cigarette with his finger as his gaze was eagerly turned towards the city; the European flare of the streets and buildings sloping ever downwards to the sea that crawled out endlessly in the distance. Azure waters sparkling and shifting with cresting waves from the heady wind that gusted through the city; rustling dresses, disturbing parasols, and tousling the blond’s soft hair.
The feel of it still viscerally on the tips of Zoro’s fingers as he was hardly able to believe everything that had happened in the last few hours. Still in awe at himself for missing all the signs he had thought to be disinterest but were actually thinly veiled concern; the memory of holding Sanji in his arms still feeling like something out of a dream.

A short lived one however as it seemed there was a glaring flaw in their relationship and it was currently stuck on Zoro's ring finger. They hadn't discussed much else after their abrupt confession, and Zoro hadn't even begun to consider what he was even going to do when they returned to Merryville, but they had both decided to leave it for later. Adulterous feelings aside, there was the much more pressing matter of Zoro's bounty; so a fond smile and light pat on the cheek had been the end of the discussion and Sanji had lead him downstairs.

It hadn't been long before he had finished briefing Kohza, Stussy, and Sanji on what he had found out at Law’s and their plan to head to Croatia had been formed. It had been almost unspoken that Sanji would be coming along despite the fact that Kohza and Stussy hadn't been privy to their conversation upstairs.

Zoro had a hunch that Stussy was almost completely at fault for that...

He still wasn't entirely certain if he should thank the woman for forcing their hands, or if he should strangle her for keeping Sanji in such a dangerous situation, but at that point he was unable to sway the blond. They had deigned to bring him along and hopped on the earliest flight to Zadar in hopes of finding out the significance of the bar that the bounty was tied back to.

And despite numerous attempts and offered suggestions, Zoro was no closer to figuring out where he remembered the stupid bar from. The amount of places he had been for work alone made it a blur in a hopeless attempt to even guess what the significance of the bar could be...

“Reminds me of home...”

“Hm?” A lazy grunt was all Zoro could manage as he pulled himself from his circular musings, knowing it was pointless trying to remember but unable to stop himself from trying.

“You know,” Sanji waved an airy hand, “less fancy, but the harbour and the sound of the gulls... There’s something homey about it.”

A vague memory of the lake back home and Sanji sitting beside him as they shared their childhood played out before him as he asked, “Do you miss it?”

“Sometimes,” Sanji admitted, gaze still turned towards the port as he took another long drag on his cigarette, letting his hand fall away before continuing with a chuckle, “this place is so much more extravagant though... Wine and fine foods; I feel like I should be wearing a suit or something.”

“You should come back...” Zoro offered, “when you're not... y'know...”

Not for the first time Zoro felt like Sanji was able to see through his sunglasses and was a touch unnerved with the accurate stare he was met with. An almost quizzical look passed across the blond’s face before he hummed absently, “Might be better with someone who knows the area...”

“Yeah...” Agreeing with a short grunt, Zoro found himself on the receiving end of a raised eyebrow that was holding far too much judgment than he wanted to deal with at the moment. Bodily turning away from Sanji, he managed, “good idea.”

Before any more comments could be made, they were interrupted by Kohza and Stussy’s arrival that had their conversation ending. Two extra tickets held aloft in Kohza’s hand as it seemed that even
during the busy season they had still managed to get seats on the next train out.

“Train’ll be departing shortly so we can board now.” Kohza informed as he came to a stop between the two, handing off the tickets to Zoro before shifting his bag back into his right hand. The indiscriminate case that to an outside eye looked like a regular briefcase, however its weight and contents were quite different, “No luggage checks; so we’ll just have to be discrete about our baggage.”

Due to Kohza’s clearance with the CIA, he had been able to get several weapons through security under the guise of work related travel. It was a huge relief since Zoro had not been eager to go through the process of re-equipment himself once they had arrived. It was far too hot to wear a jacket to conceal anything, so for now his weapons remained in his pack currently slung over his shoulder.

“Let’s get going then; I could really go for a bite to eat...” Stussy offered, propping her own case at her heels as she looked around the three men impatiently, “Peanuts and club soda are not my idea of a meal.”

Stubbing out his cigarette on the bottom of his shoe, Sanji tossed the remains of his smoke into an ashtray to signal his readiness, waving a polite hand in front of Stussy as he motioned for her to step in front of him, “After you, my lady.”

“Thank you, dear.” Stussy simpered with a playful curtsy, making off down the platform with Sanji falling in step beside her as they began chatting aimably. Zoro following shortly after Kohza as he adjusted the the strap of his pack that he kept slung over his good shoulder while taking in the station.

There was familiarness to the entire country that had been nagging at him since they had landed a few hours ago, and while he was almost positive it was nothing work related, he still wasn’t a hundred percent sure. Wracking his brain as best he could to try and remember if he’d ever been sent here, to perform any black ops missions on a political figure, or perhaps something drug related. But despite his best efforts; nothing.

Coming to a stop at the edge of the brickwork at the station platform, Zoro gazed up at the massive train groaning heavily on its rails. Steam billowing from the stack as it was preparing to leave the station, Zoro glancing around himself while attempting to find his companions; a split second of panic taking over when they weren’t initially at his side.

“Oi! Wandering cactus!” Zoro immediately regretted reacting at the ridiculous nickname - turning to look at the other three whom were already in line to board the correct railcar. Making his way over with a grumble, he kept his hands shoved in his pockets petulantly, trying to ignore the grin plastered on Sanji’s face.

“I wasn’t lost.” Zoro grunted.

Sanji’s hands shot up innocently, “You said it, not me.”

Zoro fell in step behind them as the line slowly trudged forward as people offered their tickets to the conductor before being directed to their designated cabin and dining cars. The feeling Zoro had had earlier still bothering him as he took a final glance around the station in hopes of anything jogging his memory. When he turned back he found Sanji watching him carefully.

“What?” Coming out far more defensively than he had wanted it to.

Sanji’s hand reached out - Zoro leaning away on instinct - until the pad of Sanji’s finger rested on
Zoro’s forehead before rubbing out the frown he had donned while moodily trying to remember anything of use. Scowl deepening as Sanji teased, “Relax. You keep frowning like that and your face’ll get stuck that way…”

“...oh wait.” Sanji sighed dramatically, and Zoro rolled his eyes as Sanji gave a final poke before turning away, preoccupied with handing his ticket to the conductor and following after Kohza and Stussy. Zoro trailing shortly after, remarkably frown free.

Once onboard they looked completely at home with their suitcases in tow - with the amount of tourists milling about - and managed to find their cabins with relative ease. Luggage carefully stowed and rooms locked before Stussy was practically dragging them away to find something to eat.

The dining car was packed with tourists and was a good place to seat themselves for the times being - it kept them out of trouble; there were no signs that they were being followed as of yet but Kohza wanted to remain cautious. Each of them keeping a wary eye on the passengers surrounding them as it wouldn’t be entirely a surprise if they got jumped while in such an open place. While it may be more difficult, there were plenty of agents and bounty hunters that wouldn’t mind making a scene.

Several booths lined either side of the car allowing the diners a fantastic view out of the train; to either the seaside stretched out far below them, or upwards to the hills and mountains cradling the country against the water. They took their seats at a free table, Sanji and Zoro sitting on one side while Stussy and Kohza sat on the other. A waiter was along in moments to place several menus out and Stussy wasted no time in ordering a drink for herself as the four sat quietly amoungst the hubbub of other travellers.

When drinks were provided and food ordered, it allowed them a moment of uninterrupted privacy as Kohza leaned in while noting softly, “We’ll be travelling overnight to Split; if all goes well we can get to the bar midday tomorrow. The city is a fairly large tourist hub so the more people the better; I’d like as little commotion as possible.”

“You think they’ll be there?” Sanji piped up curiously.

“I don’t know.” Kohza gave an honest shrug, “But the bar is on a pretty popular avenue so it might give us an advantage; maybe at least give Zoro an opportunity to try and remember something.”

“Considering he spent a majority of his twenties bathing in liquor;” Stussy scoffed, “it’s a wonder he can remember where anything is.”

Grunting in false gratitude at Stussy’s teasing comment, Zoro brought his arms up to cross stiffly over his chest and lean back in his seat irritably. Less annoyed at Stussy, and much more with himself for being unable to figure this whole thing out; he definitely was losing his edge. It had been a little over a week and despite the excitement he had initially enjoyed, he was now beginning to miss the lazy summer afternoon car rides with Sanji...

“Hey.”

Zoro looked up sharply at Sanji’s voice, blond watching him with a comforting smile before pointing a finger at his own forehead in clear indication of Zoro’s own scowl that had once more fell into place. Zoro hadn’t realized how tense his shoulders had become, and forced them to relax as he let the frown ease from his face. Gaze turning back to the table as he tried to focus on something else.

Unclasping one of his arms from where it had been knitted firmly over his chest, Zoro reached out to nab the glass of water the waiter had left behind. Ice already melted, he raised it to his lips and took a long swig; the summer heat making him far more thirsty than he had realized.
“So, Zoro...” Stussy mused playfully, sharp eyes gazing over the top of her wine glass with a look that belied the innocence of her following words, “you two seem to finally have everything sorted, yeah? Though I didn't hear nearly as much headboard slamming as I was expecting last night.”

The unexpected comment had Zoro inhaling a mouthful of water before hacking up nearly half of it into his lap much to the concern of fellow diners. Sanji shifted uncomfortably in his seat next to Zoro who attempted to mop up some of the water off his pants while pointedly avoiding looking at the blond.

“Stussy...” Kohza’s soft tone berated the woman.

“I guess not...” Stussy huffed with a petulant shrug, swilling her wine methodically before taking a sip, “Oh well...”

“E-Everything's fine.” His own stammer caught Zoro off guard and had him contemplating just slamming his forehead into the table and knocking himself out so he wouldn't have to continue this conversation. Even though he had feelings for Sanji – that were unbelievably reciprocated – he still was very inexperienced when it came to these sexual desires he kept feeling; several of which he still wasn't sure if he was comfortable ever acting on.

The painfully awkward silence was thankfully broken a few moments later by Sanji, who managed out hoarsely, “I... I need a smoke.”

When neither Kohza, nor Stussy, offered to go with him Zoro begrudgingly shuffled out of the booth and pushed himself to his feet to accompany the blond. Still making a habit of keeping his gaze at his feet like a child that was being scolded, not sure if he could handle meeting the blond's full stare yet without his cheeks bursting into flames.

“So I still need an escort?” Sanji raised a brow.

“You know you do.” Zoro grumbled, refusing to look anywhere but at his feet as he could practically feel Stussy's cheshire grin burning into the back of his head. He had no doubt in his mind that she was also at fault for keeping Kohza from offering to accompany Sanji for his smoke.

“Fine.” Sanji shrugged, turning and making his way down the car and past the several other dining tables filled with other passengers. Most of whom were talking amongst themselves, but a few of them were still watching him, curious over what had caused Zoro to nearly hack up a lung moments before.

“Ta-ta, darling.” Stussy sung happily as Zoro followed after, but not before flipping her off.

Making their way down the connecting car, they walked for several moments in silence as Sanji seemed far more occupied in finding an acceptable place to smoke than to talk about what had just happened. Reaching the end of the second car, they found the path blocked by the door leading out onto the precarious view platform. Sanji pausing for only a moment before giving the handle a try and finding it miraculously unlocked. They stepped out onto the rocking platform and Sanji struggled to get the pack of smokes from his back pocket.

“Sorry... about that...” Zoro attempted to lamely salvage the awkwardness Stussy had inflicted between them, watching Sanji tap the slightly crumpled package against the back of his hand to pack out the tobacco before flipping open the top and attempting to get one out from their cramped packaging.

Finally getting a cigarette free, Sanji waved the unlit smoke in an innocent gesture while shoving the
package back into his rear pocket, “Why?”

Zoro opened his mouth, but shut it shortly after meeting Sanji's pointed gaze.

“It's not like neither of us have been thinking about it,” Sanji admitted rather casually, propping the smoke between his lips as he pulled out his lighter. Murmuring around the cigarette while giving a shrug, “It's just... there's more important things to worry about right now.”

“Yeah...” Zoro agreed softly, relieved Sanji was taking everything so easily but at the same time not sure how he was supposed to admit to the blond that the idea of finally having him was far more anxiety inducing than anything else at the moment. A gun could have been put to his head and he still would probably be more nervous at the prospect of kissing Sanji than taking that bullet.

Zoro watched Sanji struggle for several moments in an attempt to shield his cigarette and light the end at the same time - but to no avail. The strong breeze surging past them had each strike of the lighter getting huffed out before it had a chance to spark to life. After several failed attempts and growing agitation, Zoro moved forward suddenly to bracket himself around Sanji and use his back to buffer the wind.

Hands carefully coming up – slowing upon Sanji’s look of curiosity – reaching out to politely snag the lighter from Sanji’s grip. Taking the hint, Sanji brought both his hands up to cradle his cigarette, while Zoro did his best to block the rest of the wind, flicking the lighter once and holding the flame up to the paper.

Sanji inhaled – the paper crackling faintly as it curled under the heat of the flame – until a proper cherry formed and Sanji was able to pull away to huff on his cigarette.

“Thanks.” Sanji chirped through a grin, smoke already curling out from around his teeth as he hadn't hesitated in taking a large drag. Zoro unconsciously pocketed the lighter in his rear pocket as he continued to watch the blond with nervous agitation.

While they had laid everything out on the table – and it had seemed like they were finally on the same page for once – Zoro still wasn't entirely certain how he was supposed to behave around Sanji. It was clear that as long as there was a gold ring on his finger, Sanji had no intention of doing anything - but everything leading up to this implied that there was a lot of sexual tension being ignored.

At this point, Zoro wasn't sure how he was supposed to behave, or what he was allowed to say, since technically they couldn't act on anything. But Sanji had refused to go home, and had made it damn clear he didn't intend on letting Zoro die before they both got back home.

Which meant....?

A frustrated sigh was torn from Zoro as his hand came up to rub against the back of his neck in an attempt to ease some of the tension from his body. Everything had become so damned complicated and Zoro had to wonder how the hell he had wound up in such a dramatic mess.

Sanji raised a brow at him but Zoro just grumbled petulantly before shuffling forward enough to wrap his arms around the blond and shove his head onto the man's shoulder. Blocking his face from the wind and subsequently ignoring the whirling thoughts that he didn't want to deal with at the moment.

Judging from the way Sanji's body stiffened before relaxing a moment later, he was only caught slightly off guard by the behaviour. Not a moment later, Zoro felt Sanji’s body jerk with a small
chuckle and a hand came up to rest in Zoro's hair placatingly, gently carding through the locks as he went about finishing his smoke over Zoro's shoulder.

“You know,” Sanji's hand paused in its motion and Zoro felt a smile against his shoulder, “she does it just to get a rise out of you.”

“Yeah. Yeah.” Zoro admitted with an irritable nod, pulling away to watch Sanji mouth a final puff from his cigarette before stubbing the butt out on the railing and pocketing it. Exhaling the stream off to the side, a devilish smile crooked the blond’s lips.

“She's damn good at it too...” he said with a tone of appreciation, hands finding his pockets, “I wonder if she could teach me some tricks.”

“You're already terrible.” Zoro groused with a scowl, “You don't need help.”

“There is always room for improvement.” Sanji argued, hand coming up and setting Zoro’s hair straight. Zoro grumbled softly, allowing Sanji to make him presentable again, controlling the urge to close his eyes and lean back into the blond. The urge was overruled when Sanji pulled away and inclined his head towards the door, “C'mon. Think you can make it through a meal without spitting up on yourself?”

“I'll try.”

~X~

Twilight had settled across Croatian countryside as the last reflections of the sun on the Mediterranean waters were replaced by the orange glow of city lights from nearby villas the train passed on its journey south. Towns coming alive with all manner of nightlife and festivities, giving the scenic view a whole new warmth despite the sun having set. A comforting rumble rocked the whole train as it chugged down the tracks and many of the passengers began bedding down for the evening.

Zoro watched the view in muted silence from the windows afforded to him in the cramped hall of the cabin car. Back firmly against the door to his and Sanji’s room as he awaited Kohza’s arrival, keeping a critical eye on all the passengers and workers that happened to walk by. A few minutes passed before Kohza was finally making his way down the car towards Zoro and came to a stop beside him.

“We'll be arriving early tomorrow morning.” Kohza advised softly, gaze shifting down the hall before back to Zoro, “I've checked with the conductor and there were no unusual scheduling or passenger changes, however I still wouldn't put it past anyone sneaking aboard.”

Zoro nodded, “When do we get in?”

“Oh-five-hundred.” Hand coming down on Zoro’s uninjured shoulder comfortably, Khoza muttered, “Keep alert.”

Zoro nodded once again, and Kohza offered a small smile in return before turning and making his way down the hall to the cabin adjacent theirs. Once Zoro heard the lock slide shut, he turned and pulled open the small door to the cramped cabin provided and stepped inside.

Sanji had taken up residence at the small table near the window - which he had cracked open several inches - as he enjoyed a nightcap in the form of a cigarette while watching the darkened countryside slip by. Attention turning towards Zoro upon his arrival, he remained silent as he finished his smoke.
Shutting the door and locking it, Zoro stopped short at the sight of the single bed situated under the netting that held their bags. Gaze shifting to the limited seating on the adjacent wall, it was obvious that it was not meant to be slept on. Sighing, he turned his gaze to the floor in resignation.

Pulling down his bag from the netting, he pulled out a couple handguns and some mags that Kohza had helpfully brought into the country in his luggage. Stashing one under the bed, and a second under the table, he then tossed the pack back up on the rack and began pulling out several spare blankets and pillows kept under the passenger seats.

Without much care, he dropped them to the floor in a semblance of a bed. Pausing in his attempt to fold a blanket in half for more padding when Sanji spoke up, “What are you doing?”

Zoro glanced down at the blankets haphazardly thrown on the floor that were still in the process of being folded to a makeshift sleeping pad. Looking back up at Sanji, unsure of what the blond was asking, he found the man watching him quizzically before tilting his head towards the mattress.

It took Zoro a few seconds to realize that Sanji was inviting him to sleep in the bed with him, the understanding causing Zoro’s cheeks to turn a bright red - the reality of Sanji’s invitation hit him full force. Breathing becoming tight and choked, his skin was suddenly clammy and itchy, and his throat instantly parched as words failed him.

“Relax.” Sanji chuckled through a huff, chin coming to rest in his palm as he looked up at Zoro with soft eyes, “You look like a tomato; take a breath.”

“I...” Zoro gasped out with a breathless croak, before finding his voice and hoarsely managing the rest, “don’t think...”

“Don’t worry,” With a dismissive shake of his head, Sanji waved off Zoro’s initial worries with a teasing shrug. Twisting to the open window, he took a short drag before exhaling the stream outside and turning back to Zoro, “I just don't think it's necessary for you to throw out your back sleeping on the floor.”

That earned a derisive snort as Zoro discarded the partially folded blanket at the foot of the bed and his arms came up across his chest defensively, “How old do you think I am?”

Without missing a beat Sanji chirped, “At least fifty.”

Rolling his eyes to the side, Zoro drawled, “Didn't realize I aged that poorly.”

“Just awful; you look like a shrivelled cabbage.” Sanji teased, tilting his head to the side in contemplation before adding, “Smell like one too.”

“You’re the one who likes me.” Zoro pointed out around a small chuckle; letting his arms unfold as he scooped up the extra bedding and began shoving it back into the seat compartment. Closing it with finality before making his way over to the blond and looked down at him, “So it sounds like a ‘you’ problem.”

“I never said it was a bad thing.” Sanji mused with a grin, head tilting back to allow his bangs to properly fall away from both of his eyes and reveal the growing bruise to his eye from the wedding. Zoro’s gaze was drawn to the swelling as Sanji added snidely, “Besides, I don’t like to waste food.”

Zoro offered a small smile at Sanji’s cheesy comment, but was still far too distracted by his injury. His hand came up to gently inspect Sanji’s face and the swollen wound around his eye that had been so charitably given to him just the other day. Initial red, now a deep purple and black, with sickly yellows tingling the outside; even though the eye was usually hidden behind the man’s swept bangs, it...
didn't stop Zoro from noticing it. Thumb coming up to brush earnestly across the bruise, he commented, “Got worse.”

“Eh,” Sanji shrugged dismissively, but continued to allow Zoro's hand to carefully cradle his jaw. Zoro idly noticed the stubble that had begun to form along the man’s jaw since the last time he had shaved; looking about as scruffy and underslept as the first time Zoro had run into him outside that coffee shop all those months ago... “I'm fine; always wondered what being pistol whipped felt like anyway.”

Drawn from the memory, Zoro let his hand fall away as he inclined his head with a weary gaze trained on the blond in mild disbelief. His hand came up to rub at the back of his neck, expression stating everything he didn’t have the time to say- contempt for letting it happen, but mainly exhaustion over Sanji’s ridiculous response.

“Not pleasant.” Sanji finished with an informative nod of his head, his messy bangs falling back to partially cover the injury.

Hand pausing from where it had been rubbing the tension out of his neck, Zoro muttered under his breath, “Could've told you that.”

“It's a learning experience,” Sanji argued firmly, dismissive hand waving a final flourish as he demanded, “Would you deny a man a fantastic dinner story?”

“You...” Zoro paused as the concern he had been harbouring since this whole ordeal began to rise up on his tongue with a sour tang. Garnering a swallow, he watched Sanji seriously, weary over the blond's insane optimism that this mess wasn't just going to go from zero to one hundred in the next couple hours. Head shaking minutely, he inquired, “You really think everything's gonna be alright, don't you?”

“Of course.” A flicker of concern flashed across Sanji's face, replaced moments later by a frown and shrewd scoff, “Should I not?”

“I...” Hand finally falling away from where it had been resting on his neck, it fell limply to his side as he gave an honestly hopeless shrug, “I just thought you were being nice...”

“Well,” Sanji paused, “Yosaku assured me there's no safer place than with you...”

“And you believed him?” Zoro scoffed skeptically.

“Not at first... No...” Sanji’s words came out slowly, gaze growing distant for a few moments before rounding on Zoro with intense clarity. That unbelievable smile stretched across his kind face as he added, “But you did a pretty good job at changing my mind...”

“I…” The word was wheezed out before Zoro even knew what he was going to stay. Watching Sanji breathlessly for a few moments before a chuckle had him giving up on any sort of proper response. Instead, he simply watched the man warmly as he took the compliment for what it was, and cracked a smile in appreciation.

Sanji’s suave attitude flickered as he gazed up at Zoro and the silence once more stretched between them, a mild blush of his own began creeping up the blond’s neck. Zoro watched curiously as Sanji quickly turned away to take a final puff on his smoke with a trembling hand before speaking again.

“C'mon,” Jamming out the remainder of the cigarette into the makeshift ashtray - that he had fashioned out of the cardboard lid of the cigarette packaging - he pushed himself to his feet decisively, “Let’s get some sleep; I know you haven't been.”
For all his previous ignorance, it took only a moment for Zoro to realize Sanji was just as embarrassingly affected by him as he was by the blond. Smile transforming into a wry grin, he realized that unnerving Sanji was pleasantly entertaining and now had an inkling as to why Sanji enjoyed trying to rile him up so much.

Without a word, Zoro agreed with a nod and began to stiffly remove his shirt, shuffling it off his shoulders as he lowered his arms to find Sanji firmly looking the other direction as he undid the cuff on his own shirt. Zoro glanced down at his pants before firmly deciding against removing them, looking back up in time to see Sanji finish taking his shirt off and toss it onto the couch. Zoro realized that if this was a game they were going to play then he was going to lose almost immediately.

Sanji turned around to face him, and in that moment Zoro knew for certain he had lost the match. The blond took a step towards him and all Zoro could do was limply let his shirt slip through his fingers and fall to the floor. Blinking owlishly, he realized Sanji was looking at him expectantly, and stuttered out, “What?”

“I said, how’s that?” Sanji repeated with a light tap to the exposed bandages on Zoro’s shoulder, Zoro’s still dazed gaze followed the motion before fully realizing what Sanji was asking.

“Fine.” Zoro managed while clearing his thoughts, genuinely trying to think about how the wound was doing, “I cleaned and changed it before the flight.”

“I’ll change them tomorrow, yeah?” Sanji offered with a smile, turning away and toeing off his shoes as he made for the small bed. Zoro watching the line of the blond’s back in interest as he realized it wasn’t often that he saw Sanji without a shirt on, his skin so much paler than he would have thought.

“Yeah…” Zoro agreed on a mindless exhale as Sanji fell into the bed with a groan of relief, eyes falling shut the moment his head hit the pillow.

For all of Zoro’s earlier cockiness, he found himself right back at square one as he was met with the daunting task of getting into a bed that had Sanji in it. As the floor once more started becoming a fantastic option, he caught the sight of Sanji’s expectant gaze and gave in with an inaudible tortured groan.

Zoro slowly climbed into bed, settling into the blankets awkwardly, lying on his back and staring up with his body remaining unnaturally rigid. True to his word not to do anything unseemly while Zoro was still tied to another, Sanji rolled over with his back to Zoro and settled about going to sleep. For Zoro, however, sleep seemed impossible with the whirlwind of thoughts keeping him awake.

He was keenly aware of every inch of the blond’s body currently in contact with his – the heel of his foot brushing against Zoro's ankle, his lower back pressing into Zoro's hip, and his broad back pressed up to Zoro's shoulder – none of this wearing on him nearly as much as the heat he felt radiating from Sanji. Each rise and fall of the blond’s body as he drifted off became a metronome that Zoro's heart fell in beat with and despite its hypnotic power found himself no closer to sleep.

Instead remaining within the mental vicissitudes of freaking out over being in the same bed as the man he had feelings for, and fighting the urge to roll over to throw his arm around the other man. These thoughts swirled within him for what felt like hours before he eventually caved to his dreams.

~X~

Sweat covered and gasping, Zoro jerked awake into the blinding darkness and the unsettling rocking of the caboose on the rails. Drawing in several ragged breaths, his eyes adjusted to the dark despite
the vision of his dream still burned into the back of his eyelids, causing his sweat to run cold. An unexpected hand on his shoulder had him jerking into action and tackling the suddenly visible figure to his left.

Pinning the other man to the bed as best he could before his vision corrected itself enough to see Sanji staring up at him calmly. That expression, more than anything, caused Zoro's anxiety to stop short – faster than any other time he could remember – and he fell limply onto the man's body. His hands eased their grip on Sanji's wrists immediately as he noticed a small reassuring smile quirk Sanji's lips.

A word of gratitude got stuck on his tongue as his nightmare continued to fade, only to be replaced by the terrifying notion of how intimately he had Sanji pinned beneath him. His body fitting perfectly against the blond, he became acutely aware of just how close their faces were, and how Sanji wasn't moving to pull away or push Zoro off him; only continuing to watch him with that damn look of reassurance.

Each breath that tumbled across his dry lips came out as a rattled pant of anxiety and nerves. Unable to think of a time in his life he had ever been this terrified, or intimidated, by someone who was simply looking up at him. Maybe it was the trust – or the vulnerability – but whatever it was, it had Zoro trembling like a leaf in a summer breeze and breaths shuddering out like he had never used his lungs before.

Sanji's look of adoration slowly fell into sympathetic bemusement before settling with a slight frown of concern at Zoro's choked breathing - watching Zoro carefully with apprehension. Zoro began to realize he was starting to have a very mild panic attack.

Zoro knew Sanji had drawn a firm line between them, but things kept changing between them faster than it seemed either of them could control. And despite everything said, Sanji had invited him to the same bed, and the blond certainly didn't seem at all in a rush to stop what was currently happening between them now.

Tongue slowly coming out to draw across chapped lips, Zoro watched as Sanji's eyes followed the movement with interest before rising to meet Zoro's once more. Not saying anything, and certainly making no motion to stop Zoro, allowing the man to slowly lean in and--

“A AAAA AAAA AAAA AAAA AAAA AAAA AAAA AAAA!!!”

A shrill scream echoed from the hall of the train, startling its passengers and causing Zoro to jerk away from Sanji with poignant urgency. Leaping from the bed – Sanji sent sailing onto the floor – Zoro flipped the mattress and snatched the gun he had hidden underneath; loading it, cocking it, and rounding on the door with it raised as Sanji gave a groan of livid annoyance from his place on the floor.

“Son of a--”

Zoro dropped to the floor as swiftly as possible, keeping the gun trained on the door as his other hand clamped over the blond's mouth to silence him. Sanji's face was a gorgeous concoction of heated outrage and livid indignation as Zoro lowered himself closer and muttered as quietly as possible.

“Shh.” Zoro mouthed silently, before ducking his head a fraction and mumbling guiltily, “Sorry.”

A mild snort and an exaggerated eye roll told Zoro that Sanji wasn't nearly as annoyed as he was pretending to be, though still a tad unimpressed. Releasing his hold on the blond, they both remained
silent and strained for any sound of the other passengers. Heavy footsteps and slamming of doors – followed by cries of outrage – seemed to indicate someone was searching the train.

Side eyeing the blond, he gave a short nod before training the barrel of his gun on back of the door and waited. Listening as door by door got knocked in until – judging by the annoyed cursing heard through the wall – theirs was next. Zoro found himself breathing out a slow stream of air as he focused intently on the press of Sanji’s shoulder he had pinned under his back, rather than his previous nightmare.

The second the door was kicked open, Zoro kicked the door immediately shut - just barely catching the surprised look of the man who hadn't expected both of the cabins’ occupants to be on the floor and especially not one of them to have a gun trained on him. Zoro got enough of a look to notice the gun in man's grip and the moment the door was shut once more, he levelled his own on the wood where the man's head had been a moment before and fired.

A crack echoed down the train and garnered several more screams from terrified passengers, but not enough to mask the thud of a limp body hitting the floor outside their door. Keeping low, Zoro inched towards the door and pulled it open sharply to find the man he had just shot on the floor with a bullet hole going perfectly through his forehead.

Leaping to his feet, he kept his back up against the now open door with his gun poised readily as he snuck a quick glance out into the hall. A crowd of horrified bystanders gathering on each end of the hall as several figures could be seen making off in the opposite direction.

Reaching back, Zoro tucked his gun into the back loop of his belt to hopefully not draw attention from the crowd as he stepped out into the hall, Kohza was outside his cabin a moment later with Stussy behind him. Jerking his thumb over his shoulder, Zoro grunted, “That way.”

“Got it.” Kohza clarified as he began making for the front of the train with Stussy close on his heels, offhandedly asking, “You good?”

“Fine.” Zoro assured, watching as the crowd dispersed enough to let them through. Curious murmuring and concerned voices began to fill the hall as several figures could be seen making off in the opposite direction.

On instinct he found his hand snagging his gun free from his belt and rounding the corner, training on the man responsible and firing a single shot. At the two gunshots pandemonium broke out as passengers screamed and ran in different directions, desperately trying to get out of the hallway and back to their cabins; the calamity allowing Zoro enough time to see the one man he managed to shoot limp off down towards the end of the train with someone else in tow.

“Stay here!” Zoro barked at Sanji, throwing the door shut behind him as he darted out into the carpeted hall barefoot and gun drawn much to the horror of several of the passengers that were already panicked and trying to get to another car to safety. Darting down the hall, many flung themselves out of his way as he could still see the two men fleeing into the next car.

Skidding to halt in front of the door, he threw it open to find the dining car completely deserted, lights off, and wine glasses clinking minutely from the bar. Gun raised and ready, he stalked into the room, continuing for the next door as the trail of blood on the carpet made it apparent neither were going to try and hide.

Bursting through the second door, Zoro found himself on the end platform of the train with the tracks
beneath him whirling past into the darkness. The light from the train only illuminated so much around them before the rest was lost to the night and only the vague shadowy figures of passing trees and poles could be discerned. There was no way either of them would have been bold enough to jump, which meant...

Turning abruptly to the ladder poised to the off side of the door, Zoro grunted in annoyance before snagging a rung and began climbing. Getting up onto the roof was harder than he had anticipated, wind cutting in his eyes and stinging his face as he could just barely make out the figure of a man trudging along the roof.

Steadying himself, Zoro began running along the metal grated walkway atop the train as he tried to catch up with the man. Croatian countryside whipping past them, wind hitting his bare chest and rustling his pants as the man was making for the front of the train. “Oi!”

A random shot fired towards him had a bullet pining off the roof several feet away as it at least seemed the man didn’t intend to stay and fight; making it a lot easier for Zoro. Another shot with a tad more aim ricocheted off the metal in front of him and sent a spray of shrapnel up at him.

“Son of a--” Zoro cursed under his breath, reaching behind to pull his own pistol free as he muttered, “Fine; have it your way.”

Dropping into a crouch, he cupped his hand on the underside of the barrel and rested his hands on his knee, the wind and rocking of the train making it nearly impossible to aim. Using his leg to steady himself, he took aim on the retreating man, before pulling the trigger once. The crack of the shot was completely muffled by the rushing of the wind, however the body dropping a moment later and tumbling from the train let Zoro know he had hit his target.

Without a second look, Zoro was back on his feet and following the other man that was nearing the end of the two conjoined cars. A large gap separating them and the next two cars ahead of him, the man speeding up his pace as it seemed he was going to attempt to jump.

Mid jump between the two cars, it seemed like he was going to clear the gap flawlessly before something reached out to snag the man’s foot, sending him crashing to the deck below. When Zoro managed to reach the end of the car and look down to the area below he found Sanji looking up from the railings with a cheerful smile on his face and hand raised in greeting; the other man lying unconscious on the platform.

“Yo!”

Rolling his eyes, Zoro carefully climbed down onto the platform below and swung himself across the links connecting the two cars until he landed in front of Sanji. Having to yell over the rushing of the wind and the clattering of the train on the tracks, “What the hell were you thinking?”

“You’re shit at ‘thank you’s,'” Sanji commented dryly, “has anyone ever mentioned that?”

“Yeah, you!” Zoro bit out savagely, “But that doesn't--”

A sharp pain to his ankle and sudden weightlessness took over him as he felt his body begin to tumble slowly backwards with the momentum of the moving train. Only barely noticing the man who had regained consciousness and had managed kick his feet out from under him while he had been preoccupied.

Hand lashing out at the last second, he managed to grasp one of the railings as his legs swung dangerously underneath the platform. A scream left him as his bad shoulder took most of the weight
and he immediately felt his stitches tear free for the umptenth time.

Other hand flailing up to grasp one of the other railing legs as he attempted to pull himself up, he watched in horror as the previously unconscious man was now back on his feet. Blood from where he had hit his head was trailing down the side of his face, but judging from the snarl on his face, he was intending to return the favour to Sanji. Hands already raised, he launched at the blond, Zoro’s panicked shout coming short as Sanji retaliated.

“Sorry about this!” Sanji bellowed loudly, knocking the man’s hand aside, his own hand lashed out and grabbed the man’s collar in a firm grasp before falling back onto the grated platform. Jerking the man down with him, Zoro watched as Sanji placed his foot in the crook of the man’s hip and kicked up; flipping the man completely over Zoro, the railing, and sending him flying off the train.

A second later the blond was rolling onto his knees and crawling over to Zoro, one hand on his wrist in a vice grip and the other at his elbow as he helped pull Zoro back up. As he got further onto the platform, fingers tangled aggressively around his upper arm and he was yanked forward with enough strength to send both men crashing back onto the platform. Slamming into the metal floor, the air gushed from Sanji painfully as Zoro tried to lighten the impact by taking some of it to his knee and hip - fighting to cover a hiss as his still healing hip took most of the force.

Stillness hung between them as their position mirrored what had taken place moments ago in their cabin before being so rudely interrupted. It was significantly colder due to the wind, and there was more clothing separating them, but there was still a delicate intimacy in the moment that had them both frozen to the spot. Nervous breathes danced between them as neither attempted to break the stalemate first.

“Uh...” Zoro finally grunted out lamely, “Thanks.”

“That’s better.” Sanji responded with a smug grin, sounding far more breathless than the situation required as Zoro began pushing himself off the blond. Getting to his feet and offering a hand which Sanji took, barely getting back on his feet before he was goading, “That’s the second time I’ve saved your life!”

“You’re keeping track? Zoro cast an incredulous look at the blond.

“You’re not?”

Zoro simply shook his head, both in disbelief and in answer to Sanji’s question. Turning away, he jimmed open the door to the car and stepped inside as the blond followed. Closing the door and cutting off the roaring wind, he was finally able to talk to Sanji in a relatively normal tone, blond already heading back to the main railcar.

“Count is four to two by the way.” Sanji informed over his shoulder, “Slowly but surely; I’m not defeated yet, I’ll--”

“Are you okay?” Zoro interrupted Sanji’s rambling a tad harshly, coming to a halt as he watched Sanji’s back carefully. Aware of the huge elephant in the room that Sanji seemed intent on ignoring in favour of a few snide comments. Sanji turned a wry look back on Zoro as the man watched the blond seriously.

“Why are you asking me that?” Sanji scoffed, gaze flitting up and down Zoro humorously, “You’re the one that almost got guillotined by a train.”

“That man...” Zoro alluded softly to what had just transpired out on the platform, “you...”
“It’s fine.” Judging by Sanji’s tone he didn’t want to continue the conversation that Zoro was clearly trying to start, but how could he not. How could he ignore the fact that a week ago Sanji had adamantly tried to save one of their attackers, and now he had been forced to do the exact opposite because Zoro was stupid enough to drop his guard.

“If I hadn’t…” Zoro muttered, unable to finish his statement as he cast a bitter look to the side and growled, “I made you do something terrible.”

“Oh, don’t you dare.” Sanji practically groaned the words as he rounded on Zoro and strode towards him with a finger raised in warning, “Don’t you dare blame yourself. I swear to god if you do I will kick the shit out of you!”

A quiet murmur was all Zoro could manage, “A week ago you would have never done something like that.”

“Probably not, but that doesn’t matter.” Sanji argued with a firm finger finding Zoro’s chest and jabbing into it, hair a glorious, wind tangled mess and eyes a burning blue of ferocity, “Priorities change. I get to decide what’s important to me; not you.”

Zoro didn’t have a response, but if there was ever a time he wanted to gather Sanji up in his arms and kiss him this was most certainly it. However the moment passed, and Sanji was huffing with finality and retracting his finger, turning to continue down the deserted car, Zoro’s hand lashed out to nab Sanji’s elbow and turn him back to face him.

“You know… Um…” Zoro paused, unable to meet Sanji’s gaze, fumbling over his words as he tried to reassure Sanji, “he’s probably not dead. This is a slow moving train; the worst he’ll have is some broken bones. So you don’t have to… you know… worry.”

Sanji’s foot came into view as the blond took a step closer, and Zoro glanced up to see Sanji take another step towards him. Hand coming up to gentle card through Zoro’s hair and cup the back of his head, he pulled Zoro forward until his forehead rested on Sanji’s and he found his eyes crossing in an attempt to focus on blue. A smile lifted Sanji’s cheeks and the blond muttered sincerely, “Thanks.”

Zoro swallowed thickly around a response, arms slowly rising to hold Sanji in return before nearly jumping out of his skin as a voice from their right singsonged pleasantly, “Am I interrupting?”

Both men snapped their heads to the side to find Stussy standing in the doorway to the car, in the process of tucking her gun away as she watched with a rather mischievous grin. Hands coming down to rest on her hips, she continued to watch them expectantly, “Well, don’t stop on my account~”

An audible growl was just barely discernible from Zoro as Sanji took a step back with an awkward chuckle and hand at the back of his head, other hand coming up to wave her claims aside, “No. No. Nothing was going on.”

“Aw…” Stussy pouted with a heavy sigh, before her tone once more took on a seriousness as she rounded on Zoro, “I heard there were a couple others?”

“They’re no longer on board.”

“Alright,” Stussy muttered with barely a hint of surprise to her tone, “Well I suppose that makes it easier; where’s your gun?”

“Dropped it.” Which was entirely the case. After nearly falling off the train, the gun he had had
hooked through his belt had come free and was now laying in the gravel near the tracks of the deserted Croatian countryside. It was just a relief that it wasn’t one of his own; had it been he probably would’ve jumped off the train to go looking for it.

“Even easier. C’mon.” Stussy ordered as she lead them back down the train, “Kohza is getting everything sorted; I switched our cabins in the commotion so we’ll deal with the police when we reach the station. It’s a clear case of self defense, but you’re here illegally so it’ll be easier for you if Kohza and I to cover for you. Until we can rendezvous, you two need to continue to act as passengers, clear?”

“Crystal.” Sanji chirped happily as Zoro just grunted in confirmation.

They remained silent the rest of the walk back to the cabin car where they were able to slip back into the crowd of panicked travellers that were still huddled outside their cabins. Many of them calmer now as it seemed Kohza and Stussy had rounded up the other two thugs and that had at least put some of the people’s worries at ease. Kohza was currently doing damage control with several of the train employees as Stussy shoved them along through the distracted crowd.

Getting them to their new cabin, Stussy made sure they were both inside before casting a careful look around and ducking her head back in, “Kohza’s left a burner in your bag; we’ll call you with a meet point once we finish getting this sorted.”

“Good luck.” Zoro nodded in gratitude.

“No problem, darling.” Stussy winked, before shutting the door behind herself, “Stay out of trouble.”

TBC…
I realize it's been awhile. Sorry about that! Summer is a busy time for me at work. Hope you enjoy the chapter :)
A powerful whistle echoed across the cabin as the train began slowing for its arrival at the station. Zoro’s eyes cracked open with a grumble as he still hadn’t gotten nearly as much sleep as he would have liked. While the second half of the evening had been far more peaceful, the excitement of the first half of the night had left Zoro exhausted. When they had returned to their cabin Zoro had barely even gotten his pants off - far too tired to stress about sharing a bed with the blond - before he was collapsing face first into his pillow with a loud snore.

There were a couple moments as Zoro lay half awake, eyes still closed while the rocking of the train could surely put him back to sleep before a small movement made him aware he was not alone. Eyes sliding open - canopy of the small room coming into focus - he glanced down to find Sanji sprawled next to him. Legs tangled with Zoro’s, a hand thrown across his waist, head resting on Zoro’s shoulder while snoring softly.

It had been a long time since Zoro had woken up with a weight on his chest and a warm body curled against his side – Kalifa and him had gotten quite used to their separate sides of the bed – and Zoro had forgotten how comforting it was. Glancing down, his breath caught in his throat at the sight of the still sleeping blond and the way his cheek was nuzzled into the dip between Zoro's chest and shoulder.

The last time Sanji had fallen asleep on him, it had been when Zoro was certain that the blond was not his to have, but now everything was different. Now he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that this was exactly where Sanji wanted to be, and Zoro couldn’t have recalled a moment that he had been happier. Even in the wake of his guilt for his wife, he couldn't stop the swelling of happiness in his chest.

For once, he let all of his worries fall to the back of his mind and reached out a tentative hand to run through the mess of blond hair that fell around the sleeping man's face. The silky locks curled and twined between his fingers as he let his hand come to rest on Sanji's shoulder with a few of the tresses still in his grasp. His breathing growing unsteady, he realized it would take nothing to simply turn his head to press a kiss to the sleeping man's forehead.

Zoro's fidgeting seemed to cause Sanji to stir and he watched curiously as the blond's eyelids fluttered lightly before scrunching shut and an adorable frown creased his brow. A languid stretch overtook the man's body as he arched into Zoro before falling back down with a yawn, eyes finally opening to reveal sleepy blue. Hand curling into Zoro’s side, Sanji shifted his head slightly and blinked lazily as he hummed, “Hey.”

“Hey.” Zoro mimicked back, and he couldn't fathom it for the life of him, but of all the things to set
him off, it seemed that sleepy smile was going to be it. His embarrassing ‘problem’ was making itself firmly known as Zoro was just grateful he was on his back and not on his side facing the blond. Subtly propping up a leg, he let it pull the blankets up to hide his lower half as Sanji remained thankfully unaware.

Pushing himself off of Zoro, Sanji sat on the edge of the small bed and stretched again – the lines of his back tightening – hands falling to his hair to ruffle the curls that had become matted from sleep. Tossing a grin over his shoulder at Zoro, he chirped, “Sorry, I'm a cuddler.”

“N-no, it's.. uh--” Zoro raised a closed fist to his mouth and coughed rather vigorously to remove the sleep that was causing his words to come out raspy. Several harsh hacks later and he grunted, “It's okay.”

Sanji's smirk only grew wider, pushing himself to his feet to begin getting dressed as Zoro's head fell back onto his pillow in a silent groan. Embarrassed, but also grateful that Sanji seemed to not have noticed the issue that Zoro was still focusing on getting rid of. The urge to glance over and watch the man dress was nearly overwhelming, but he kept his gaze firmly on the ceiling to keep himself from making his problem any worse. By the time he felt respectable, Sanji was finished getting dressed and had taken a spot by the window to have a morning cigarette.

Following Sanji’s actions, he pushed himself out of bed - ignoring the inviting warmth in the mattress left behind from where the blond had been laying - and grabbed his pants off the floor. Slinging them on as he masked a groan, a stiffness was making itself known throughout his body and it seemed the past two weeks were really starting to take their toll on him.

As Zoro hurriedly pulled on a shirt and finished doing up his belt, he could feel the train pulling into the station with a rolling groan. Holsters and weapons were next, and he had just finished pulling a lightweight hoodie to cover the multitude of weapons on him when the announcement stating passengers could disembark echoed throughout the train.

Letting the main rush of passengers go first, Zoro took the time to pocket the spare mags and the burner phone from Stussy. Sanji pocketed the makeshift ashtray to dispose of once they were off the train and began making for the door with Zoro behind him.

A thought that had been nagging at Zoro ever since they arrived in Croatia caused him to reach out and snag Sanji’s wrist before the blond had a chance to leave the compartment. Sanji’s hand released the door as he partially turned to look back at Zoro in question. Zoro spoke up, voice quiet but gaze firm, “I need to make something clear before we leave.”

Sanji gave a polite incline of his head and continued watching Zoro.

“This is your last chance to go home.” Zoro leaned in, keeping a hold of Sanji to convey his seriousness. Levelling a stern gaze on Sanji, he spoke in a muted tone, “There is a very good chance that we could either die, or get involved in something I can’t handle.”

“You’ve mentioned this before…” Sanji's words were spoken cautious and carefully, almost sounding confused over why Zoro was telling him this again, “I'm not changing my mind.”

“Are you sure?” Zoro pressed, hand tightening marginally, watching as Sanji's gaze fell to Zoro's hand and then back to meet him, “Cause there'll either be CIA agents there waiting to take us in, or whoever is behind this whole mess; neither of which want me alive.”

Zoro wasn't sure if it had been everything the blond had been put through the past two weeks, or if he was just now seeing a totally different side to Sanji, but the man was oddly calm throughout all of
it. Instead he just watched Zoro with a stern look and then pressed deceptively, “What has you all jittery?”

“It’s a trap.” Zoro grunted. It had been obvious to him for a while now, but he had kept biting his tongue on the subject around the blond to keep him from worrying. However, now it seemed like it might be his last bartering chip to get Sanji as far away from him as possible, “If the military or anyone back home is involved then you could get blacklisted. Or incarcerated; might even treat you as a war criminal... Or you could die.”

Sanji seemed to honestly mull it over before turning to fully face Zoro for the first time since this conversation had begun. A finger was raised and playfully poked into Zoro's uninjured shoulder as Sanji informed, “If you're trying to scare me off; you're gonna have to try harder than that.”

“Sanji...”

“Zoro.” Sanji countered with the same tone Zoro had just tried to use on him. A smirk broke out across his face at Zoro’s annoyed look, “I grew up with brothers, alright? Don't think you can win.”

For a moment, it felt like they were back in Merryville arguing over something completely contrived, and Sanji was being his usual obstinate self. Refusing to back down to anything Zoro had to say which had not only infuriated Zoro, but had been one of the many reason he had fallen for the man. Heaving - what had to be the upteenth - sigh of his many conversations with the blond he conceded with a short nod.

“Fine.” He agreed, releasing Sanji’s wrist before continuing sharply, “But in case the worst happens I need to tell you--”

The palm of Sanji’s hand came up to clamp firmly over Zoro’s mouth as Sanji gave him a pointed look. Zoro was a little taken aback at being on the receiving end of such an annoying action for once as he just glared up at Sanji indignantly instead of pulling away. A smile was back on the blond’s face as he ordered, “Tell me later.”

“But--mumph.” Zoro’s response was muffled by Sanji’s hand, which tightened its hold until Zoro’s defiant expression faded and Sanji seemed comfortable in releasing him. Hand slowly falling away as he watched Zoro calmly, and Zoro had to bite his tongue from immediately protesting again as Sanji continued.

“...that way you’ll have a reason to finish all of this.”

Without missing a beat Zoro grunted, “I already have a reason.”

A thousand reasons.

Most of which were standing right in front of Zoro and attempting to give him an aneurysm via stubborn behaviour. Only made worse as Sanji smirked, teeth flashing in a confident smile as he turned and pulled the cabin door open with finality, “Then you have nothing stopping you, yeah?”

Zoro watched him dumbly for several moments as he wondered if there would ever be a time when Sanji wouldn’t surprise him. Already knowing the answer to the rhetorical question as he nodded numbly and murmured on an exhale, “Yeah...”

~X~

“Sanji, darling!”
“Stussy!” Sanji exclaimed cheerfully, pushing himself up from their table upon her arrival. They had found a cafe not too far from the station to wait as Stussy and Kohza sorted everything out with local authorities who met them at the station. Zoro downed the last of his black coffee before rising to his feet to follow Sanji.

“Everything work out alright?” Zoro asked as he set down several bills on the table, watching the two operatives join them. Good or not, he didn’t want to loiter any longer than they already had; being out in the open for too long in a city that was potentially crawling with people who were likely to stab him in the back.

“ Mostly,” Kohza intoned with a grimace, “There's some bad news.”

Zoro inclined his head.

“CIA agents are coming to investigate the case,” Kohza informed, casting a glance back over his shoulder and then around to confirm there was no one in immediate earshot, “Apparently an assassination attempt on one of their agents while on holiday was cause for some concern.”

“Fuck...”

“Yeah,” Kohza agreed grimly, “So we need to investigate this place now, before this town is crawling with operatives. Stussy will accompany you. And I’ll keep an eye on you two from a clear vantage point with Sanji. It’ll look less suspicious if a ‘vacationing couple’ inspects the place rather than two men looking like they’re there to start a fight.”

“I have everything I need,” Stussy informed, hand falling to the purse at her side, head tilting towards Kohza. “Kohza was able to keep his rifle. You ready?”

“Yeah.” Zoro grunted with an easy nod before turning on Sanji with a warning, “Don’t do anything stupid, alright?”

“Hey!” Sanji recoiled indignantly, arms coming up over his chest as he glanced among the two other people with them, clearly bothered they weren’t being lectured as well, before sneering, “You're the one that does stupid shit; I just get roped into it.”

“Promise.” Zoro urged with a frown.

“Yeah, yeah, alright!” Sanji agreed, however refusing to break his stance as he levelled on Zoro with a serious look, “You promise too.”

“That’s not import--”

Sanji’s brows raised in mock surprise, silently inviting Zoro to try to finish what he had been about to say.


“Great cooperation boys, now let’s get a move on.” Stussy groaned dramatically, stalking up on them and nabbing Zoro by the elbow - dragging him off as Sanji watched with a humorous chuckle. Sparing Kohza a wave over her shoulder, she added, “Keep the pretty one safe for me!”

All she got in response was a grumble of reassurance before Kohza was guiding Sanji off, case in hand as he went to find a clear vantage point for the bar. Sanji following close behind as Zoro fell into step beside Stussy, fighting to ignore the ill feeling he had over this whole situation.
“This is all your fault; you know.” Zoro grumbled as they slowly made their way down the crowded street. The Croatian coast packed with tourists during the warm seasons thankfully provided them with a decent amount of cover as they made for the bar further down the avenue. Zoro shoved his hands aggressively into the pockets of his jacket as he accused vindictively, “If you had just let Kohza take him home, none of this would be an issue.”

“Okay, even without my help there is no way we would have gotten that raging typhoon of ridiculousness anywhere in public without the authorities being notified.” Stussy rebuked haughtily, shaking her hair out of her face with a flourish and adding snidely, “And I saw you leaving; I know what a man walking to his grave looks like.”

“Did you ever think that it was none of your business?” Zoro stopped in his tracks, levelling a scowl on the woman. Tourists huffed and scowled as they had to make their way around him, but his priorities were entirely set on the woman a few steps ahead of him who had stopped as well and turned a sharp look on him.

“You finally pulled your heads out of asses though, right?” Stussy countered, crossing her arms over her chest, “If it wasn't for me, you'd still be sulking and he'd be in America worrying about you.”

Breaking his stance, he strode forward with an aggravated step and snarled, “It wasn't your place to decide.”

“It wasn’t yours either.” Stussy snapped back, not at all intimidated by Zoro’s behaviour, “It was his.”

Zoro didn't have a retort, only a scowl.

“It may surprise you to hear this,” Tone still rigid despite the soft expression she had turned on Zoro, “but no one is forcing him to be here. You may have dragged him into this, but at some point he decided to stay. And I don’t know if he made that clear or not, maybe I was asking too much to expect two grown men to talk about their emotio--”

“It’s not about that!” Zoro cut her off irritably.

“Then what?” Stussy’s eyes almost rolled back into her head with the force of the exaggerated eye roll she gifted him with. Head tilting back with the motion as the sigh she heaved almost seemed to be causing her physical pain before finally gifting Zoro with the most exasperated look he’d ever seen.

They had been still for too long, tourists jostled them both as they moved to get around them, but Zoro could hardly be bothered. Avoiding Stussy’s gaze, he admitted, “I couldn’t live with myself if anything happened to him.”

“Oh, and he can?” Stussy countered, “How is his life more important than yours?”

“It just is.”

“And what about to him?” Stussy accused, “If your positions were reversed, how would you feel?”

On instinct Zoro’s mouth was open and ready to bark a response, only nothing came out because that was something he had honestly never considered. And he could easily admit - even from the few times already that Sanji had done something risky - he would be absolutely livid if the blond tried to leave Zoro somewhere and put himself in harm’s way. Zoro sagged as the wind was completely taken from his sails and he grumbled, “Point taken.”
“He cares about you… a lot.” Stussy’s imploring tone was cut short as she jerked her thumb over her shoulder and demanded, “So can you stop acting like a baby and get your head in the game? Let’s finish this.”

Nodding in gracious defeat, Zoro allowed the discussion to end but not before promising to make it up to Sanji when this was all over. Throwing himself back into motion, he grudgingly followed after the infuriating woman before falling in step beside her and commented pettily, “Don’t expect a ‘thank you’ when this is all over.”

“Oh course not, darling.” Stussy simpered, “I expect Sanji’ll send one.”

Zoro could only roll his eyes at the exasperating woman as they continued down the street in silence - attempting to keep a low profile amongst the crowd as they neared a busier avenue that was vaguely familiar.

“Ther e it is.” Stussy noted, sidestepping Zoro to point at the building just visible through the tourists milling about. It took a bit of weaving to get through the crowd, but they eventually came to a stop in front of the quaint pub, the ox-head signpost out front flickered distant memories as an unsettling feeling of dread began to settle in Zoro’s stomach.

Without waiting for Stussy, Zoro made his way forward and tested the handle, finding it unlocked despite the closed sign poised in the window. Unease mounting, he pushed the door in and stepped inside, light from the doorway flooding the vacant room as the two inspected the unremarkable place - chairs turned over on their tables, as were the stools across the bar top. Zoro’s gaze was drawn to the counter before shifting to the back corner of the bar as a memory began nagging at him.

As though in a dream, Zoro found himself slowly walking towards the back corner of the bar where a small table was situated with two seats stacked atop its surface. Hand falling to the wooden surface, he distantly remembered a glass of amber liquor placed on that same table three years ago. Clasped in the drunken hand of a man that had given up on life and was ready to throw himself in the Mediterranean.

Zoro turned slowly and looked back at the bar top with baleful understanding, somehow the realization not leaving him as horrifyingly chilled as he thought it would. Instead it was met with defeated resignation as he slowly made his way towards the counter with soft steps. Confusion taking precedence over his anger...

“John was right…” He murmured on a breath, more to himself than anyone else as he couldn’t believe he’d been so ignorant of the signs. They were all there now that he was taking the time to sort through them, everything feeling foolishly obvious once given the right perspective.

“What?” Stussy concerned tone felt like it was miles away.

“I’m so fucking oblivious.” He whispered, thoughts returning to the bug that had been planted in his phone from the very beginning, that couldn’t have possibly been planted by anyone else than someone constantly close to him. And the people that had been watching him for months, who seemed to always be there when a certain someone wasn’t able to be...

“Um... wanna fill me in?” Stussy goaded nervously, head tilting down in an attempt to get a better look at Zoro's averted gaze. Footsteps faltering, he reached the bar and began to realize there was so many more questionable things to her behaviour over the years he had always just written off.

“It’s her.” Zoro muttered softly, hand coming to rest on the bar top that so many years ago had held a martini glass. Belonging to a woman who had piqued Zoro’s interest long enough that he had
decided to marry her on a foolish whim; unwittingly confusing desire with love.

“Still not sure what you’re talki--” Stussy mumbled behind him but her words were interrupted by the door creaking open. Light flooded the dimly lit establishment, and Zoro looked up to see the vague silhouette on the wall of the woman he had married.

“Hello, darling~”

Midsummer heat drained from the room as an icy chill of betrayal settled over Zoro. Eyes meeting the cold blue of Kalifa’s as she glared him down across the expanse of the tiny room, leaving Zoro to flounder over the revelation. All the signs pointed directly to her, but the lack of motive left Zoro reeling.

“Kalifa...” Zoro managed on a breathless exhale as a tension began to grow just under his chest. Unable to stop the accusatory tone from slipping over the word as he stared her down. Stussy was far less inclined and her gun was drawn within moments, levelled on Kalifa as her gaze flickered between them nervously.

“There’s the operative I married,” Kalifa crooned happily, “Though I am disappointed it took you so long to figure it out... I’ve been waiting here for ages.”

Through all of his confusion Zoro quietly managed a single word, “Why?”

“We’ll have time for that later.” Kalifa mused before turning a cold stare onto Stussy, “After you get rid of your little sidekick.”

“Try again.” Stussy sneered, keeping her gun levelled on Kalifa steadily as she stared down the sights of the barrel. Zoro however, was still too shocked to reach for his gun, and even less prepared to raise it on his wife.

“Look,” Kalifa sighed dramatically, taking a calm yet menacing step forward as she drew her gun from the holster on her hip, and raised it, “We can do this the easy way, or the hard way; and I don’t care which you choose.”

Gun trained on him, Zoro couldn’t do much more than stare blankly at her as he was still trying to figure out exactly how and why she would be here right now. His shock was luckily keeping him somehow present despite the ever growing pressure on his chest and the disbelief that was rendering him motionless. Quite aware of the aggressive grip she had on her weapon and how the next few seconds were likely to play out.

Knowing Kalifa, she would change her target at the last moment while drawing her second weapon. The first would take out Stussy before the second would even be drawn to train directly on Zoro. Which meant he had a couple seconds at most before Stussy would have a dime sized hole in her head.

Despite the betrayal short circuiting Zoro’s mind, his body reacted on instinct as he sharply dove to the side to scoop Stussy up in his arms just as Kalifa’s arm began to shift. He launched them both up and over the bar counter as Kalifa fired where her target had been moments before and the bullet imbedded itself in his arm rather than Stussy’s forehead.

The silencer on the end of Kalifa’s weapon made it so no one outside on the street heard anything. A moment later Zoro and Stussy tumbled to the ground on the other side of the bar as Zoro’s left arm flared up with pain and the tightness in his chest was becoming heavier.

“Come on out, sweety!” Kalifa’s voice was honey sweet as the distinct clack of her shoe stepping
forward could be heard, “You and I still need to talk! You have to the count of three and then I'm going to set that bitch on fire!”

“Real sweetheart you married!” Stussy huffed as she disentangled herself from Zoro.

“She's always been a bit intense.” Zoro gasped out, hand grasping the fabric over his chest as he fought to keep his breathing under control. He scrambled backwards until his shoulders slammed into the shelves behind the counter - bottles rattling unsteadily - the added support helping to alleviate some of the panic that felt like it was crushing Zoro into the floor.

“I couldn't tell.” Stussy murmured, already next to him and cocking her gun.

“One.”

Another gunshot fired and shattered a bottle perched high above them, sending a cascade of liquor and glass onto the two hiding below. The crack was the final catalyst to the stress currently piling on top of Zoro and he found himself slumping into the shelf and fighting to draw in a breath beyond the blackness encroaching around him. All of it becoming too much as the truth he had been denying the moment he had stepped inside this building was coming to a pinnacle.

“Oi! Oi!” A hand repeatedly patted his cheek with a nervous intensity and he saw Stussy's face slowly swim back into view, words distorted and spoken much later than when her lips moved, coming through with a choked slur, “C'mon stay with me; this is not helpful!”

An impossible amount of weight felt like it was keeping his arm pinned to the ground, and it took most of his energy to lift it as the fog began to minutely fade. Hand coming up to grab Stussy's wrist to stop the slapping, he grumbled through a thick exhale, “I'm good.”

Stussy pulled away and readied her gun once more, clearly planning on throwing herself headlong into a shoot out with his crazed wife. Reaching out a heavy hand, he placed it atop her gun and gave a silent shake of his head when Stussy looked at him in surprise as Zoro was beginning to pull himself back. He was beginning to get a grip on himself as another shot was fired, followed by another bottle shattering as his wife gave an irritated huff, “Two!”

“Find something strong,” Zoro grumbled, still keeping one hand on his chest where the tension was squeezing his lungs. The other hand released Stussy’s gun to dig into his back pocket where he felt Sanji’s lighter from the other night pressing into his rear. Stussy getting the hint and holstering her weapon as she began riffling through the shelves afforded to them, “150 proof.”

“Got it!” Stussy huffed, snatching a bottle from the back and wrenching a dish towel off a hook. Unscrewing the cap, she sloshed a decent amount of liquor onto the rag and then stuffed it in the mouth of the bottle hastily before handing it off to Zoro as he fought to strike the lighter in his shaking hand. First strike; nothing. Second strike, a spark.

With an almost exhausted huff Zoro heard Kalifa tisk, “Three…”

Her voice cut through his earlier panic with surprising clarity as he stared down at his trembling hands and the blue convenience store lighter he had purchased for Sanji back in Japan. Sanji who had been tied up in his apartment and nearly killed on orders from Kalifa, Sanji whom he’d had to drag halfway across the world - kicking and screaming - to make sure no one else would try to shoot him, and Sanji who had done more for him in a few months than the woman on the other side of the bar - who was currently shooting at him - had ever done.

Flicking the lighter a third time, it sparked to life easily as suddenly Zoro’s resolve over the situation
was certain. Whatever final ties he still harbored for the woman had vanished the moment she’d shot him, and now his only intention was to make sure to get her some place she could never pose a threat again. To him, to Sanji, to anyone else in his damned life.

Tossing the bottle over the counter with a high arc, there was a shattering of glass followed by a roar of flames that engulfed the potent liquor almost immediately. Zoro could hear an enraged shriek before the door to the bar was thrown open and everything else was drowned out by the roar of the fire.

Flickering shadows began dancing on the wall of liquor high above them as it seemed the fire had caught far better than he had intended and was engulfing more and more of the building with every second. Smoke already rising in tendrils and curling across the ceiling as Zoro turned to Stussy.

“We gotta move quick.” Zoro jerked his head towards a window just beside the bar, only a few feet away but there was no cover if Kalifa was covering them from the doorway, “Best chance.”

Stussy nodded, “I’ll cover you.”

In a lame attempt to lighten the situation Zoro grinned, “Ladies first?”

“Age before beauty.” She countered with a smirk, already on her feet despite remaining crouched behind the counter, giving a polite wave towards the window as she gestured for Zoro to take the lead.

“Truce.”

Grabbing Stussy around the waist, Zoro bolted out from behind the bar and launched himself forward, shoulder first and head ducked. Muted gunfire was discernible over the fire as he threw himself bodily into the window with Stussy held protectively in his arms. Glass shattered as they tumbled across the ground, coming to a stop several feet away from the building in the grungy alley. Flames curled out of the windows and smoke billowed into the sky above.

Rolling out of the fall and onto his feet, Zoro turned on the corner of the building expecting to see Kalifa, but only found shocked and concerned tourists making for the building. If Kalifa intended to flee then there wasn’t any time to waste. Rounding on Stussy, he stopped dead as he saw her leaning against the adjacent building with her hands pressed against her bloody side.

“Damn it.” Zoro muttered as he began dropping to a knee, hands extended towards her as the blood continued to spread across the white fabric and soaked further down her torso. Whether it was the glass from their fall or a stray bullet he couldn’t tell, but regardless - she was losing blood far too quickly.

“I’m fine!” Stussy barked as she smacked his hand away, “Don’t let her get away!”

A final livid glare from Stussy had Zoro jumping to his feet with a stiff nod as he ran down the alley and out onto the street where the gathering crowd were investigating the burning building. Looking around, he caught a glimpse of the familiar figure of his wife making her way through the crowd before bolting after her, “Stop!”

All Zoro got in response was a smirk thrown over her shoulder as he continued racing after her through the crowd gathering to witness the fire that was engulfing the building. The bystanders were thankfully more interested in the commotion of the building than to get a good look at him as he rushed to catch up with his fleeing wife.

Earlier distraught was replaced by anger as now his only intentions were to catch her and find out
why the hell she had done all of this to begin with. Normally his mind would be flooded with scenarios and possible motives, but everything was blank as he raced after her.

Getting through the worst of the crowd, he stumbled out onto the less crowded side of the street and caught a glimpse of her hair as she darted down a nearby alley. Taking off after her at a full sprint, he kept his injured arm clutched to his side to alleviate some of the pain - skidding around the corner and following the back alley as long as it went until it came to a cross street and he was forced to stop. Head whipping around all three avenues, trying to catch a glimpse of her; she had claimed to want to talk, which meant she wanted him to follow her…

Nothing.

“Fuck!” Zoro cursed in frustration, turning on his heel angrily as he couldn’t even get an inkling to which direction she had gone. He’d hardly finished his turn before he had an armful of blond barreling straight into him and nearly knocking him over. Both of them righting themselves as Zoro dealt with his shock of coming face to face with Sanji, while Sanji was looking at him incredulously.

“What are you doing?!” Sanji balked, looking clearly awestruck to find Zoro simply standing still before darting around him with a yell, “C’mon!”

“Wh--” Before Zoro even had a chance to berate the blond for ditching Kohza, he was forced to chase after Sanji who was already taking off down the street. A confused Zoro having to sprint to catch up as he yelled after the blond with furious intent, “We made a deal remember?!”

“You expect me to keep it now?!” Sanji bellowed over his shoulder as he took a sharp right and Kalifa’s retreating figure came into view several blocks down the large avenue sloping towards the docks. Waving an impatient hand towards where Zoro’s wife was currently getting away, “Even after I came here to help you?!”

“If you don’t listen to me you’re going to get yourself killed!” Zoro barked as he was finally caught up with the blond, nearly taking out an elderly fellow that had barely gotten out of the way in time.

“Even when I do listen to you I almost get killed,” Sanji murmured cheekily, still sprinting full pace as the avenue they were on was coming to an end. The sea and an expansive marina coming into view as they both skidded to halt and stared down at the multiple docks floating below, “So what does it matter?"

“That’s not the point.” Zoro offhandedly muttered as he could see a wisp of long blond hair making its way down one of the many docks below. She paused in her retreat to cast a glance up at them before giving a taunting wave and making for a small boat near the end.

“I think it’s a rather important footnote.” Sanji jibbed, “Also why’s your wife trying to kill you?”

“I don’t know.” Zoro growled, hands tightening on the wood in front of him as he realized her intentions, pushing away from the railing viciously as he stormed off, “But I’m going to find out.”

Zoro abandoned his previous conversation with Sanji to sprint down the pier and to the boat at the end Kalifa was planning on taking. Ducking and weaving through other seafarers who had decided to come down to take out their vessels on the gorgeous afternoon.

Making his way through the maze of docks that serpentinized further and further out into the water to accommodate all the boats. As he got onto the last stretch of pier he sprinted as fast as his legs could carry him as she started the engine, getting to the end of the pier just in time for her boat to pull out. Zoro sprinting faster as he had no choice but to swim after wherever she was leading him.
A hand to the collar of his shirt reefed him back, Zoro gagging as he turned a livid expression onto Sanji who was challenging him with one of his own, “You’re not swimming after her, you loon!”

“I have to follow her!” An aggressive hand was thrust after the boat still making its way slowly out of the marina, and his wife still very much visible within.

Sanji’s eyes narrowed as he raised a hand in confusion and stated almost rhetorically, “Seems like a trap.”

“It is.” Zoro corrected without missing a beat. She wanted Zoro alone - that was clear from the moment she stepped into the bar - and she knew without a doubt that if she fled Zoro would follow without a second thought. Everything about this was playing directly into her hands, and Zoro clearly had no other choice; she knew that.

“Then shouldn’t we just wait?” Sanji argued, “Didn't Kohza say that the CIA are sending some agents; can't they take over from here?”

“I'm retired; she gets away and I'll never get this chance again; I won't get to go home, and neither will you.” Zoro shook his head in frustration. If he didn’t catch her now, there was no telling how long it would take before he could find her again; his bounty would remain intact and it would be unlikely he could return to his old life. He and Sanji would both get put in witness protection, and that was only a best case scenario if the CIA decided to not throw him into military confinement for the rest of his life. “At least not until she's caught.”

Indecision was rife on the blond's face as his head turned to look back up the pier before returning to the sea where the boat was still visible making its way along the coast. Mouth agape for a moment as though he still intended to argue before snapping shut on a firm exhale, he strode past Zoro along the pier with a determined look on his face, Zoro watching in silent confusion as the blond hopped down onto the deck of one of the sailboats.

Zoro slowly made his way over as a frown steadily dented his forehead, watching as Sanji was already scurrying across the deck - seemingly inspecting the vessel - hands making quick work of several of the ropes lashing the sails in place as Zoro demanded incredulously, “What are you doing?!”

“Get in!” Sanji commanded urgently, not even pausing to look up at Zoro as he swiftly began tying several of the loose ropes to the riggings along the side of the boat. His hands worked with practised ease as though he had done it a thousand times, and the knots he began tying were basically muscle memory.

“We can't sail that…” Zoro murmured as he was finally starting to catch on to what Sanji was planning.

“Pfht. Maybe you can't.” Sanji scoffed indignantly, pausing to cast a cocky glance over his shoulder at Zoro, arm snapping sharply as a rope gave way and the main mast unfurled with a dramatic flourish. “Now c'mon, I'm gonna teach you how to sail.”

Zoro stood on the pier in stunned silence for all of three seconds before he was hopping down onto the vessel astride the blond, still in silent awe, but clearly game for whatever crazy idea Sanji had in mind. Nodding firmly, he demanded, “Tell me what to do.”

~X~

Sanji was remarkable. True to Zoro’s earlier musings, the blond continued to surprise him. Handling
the small race boat like he had done it all his life as Zoro was left useless for once. Pulling a rope here, tying off one there, but the moment the got to deeper water Zoro was left sitting on the deck a might dumbfounded as Sanji steered the single sail from his spot atop the railing.

“When the hell did you learn how to sail?” Zoro demanded over the howling of the wind, taking advantage of the small reprieve to deal with his injury. Discarding his hoodie, he tore a chunk of fabric free from the garment and began lashing it around his left arm. He grabbed one of the ends in his teeth and cinched it as tight as he could to put on pressure on the fresh bullet wound in his arm.

“I told you; I used to race.” Sanji’s response was offhanded, gaze still pinned to the horizon as he made sure their course wasn’t veering and everything else was still in check. Angling the sail a touch he added, “This is child’s play.”

It was foolish, and Zoro knew he should be focusing on the current life threatening situation he found himself in, but he couldn’t stop himself from being utterly captivated by the other man in that moment. Feet resting on the railing as his body hung out over the ocean, the only thing keeping him from falling was the rope he kept lashed in his hand as he steadied their coarse.

Hair an absolute mess - whipping about his face - as an absolutely gorgeous look of determination set on his face, eyes narrowing through the bright sunlight and his gaze remaining pinned on the horizon. Waves crashed beneath the hull and sent timely sprays of water cresting high, spackling Sanji’s clothes as they fluttered against his frame in the high winds.

Breathless for a completely different sort of reason, Zoro just stared up at the blond and tried to think past the urge to simply grab Sanji by his unshaven face and plant a kiss on him. There were a multitude of things setting him off, but at the moment it was the fact Sanji had dove head first into danger with him. A quality he probably shouldn’t be finding endearing...

Sanji’s arm lashed out, and pointed ahead of them, pulling Zoro from his musings as he bellowed, “She's pulling into the docks over there!”

Jumping to his feet, Zoro watched as Kalifa’s boat was left in a rather secluded boat yard belonging to several warehouses. Not bothering to wait - Kalifa had no doubt seen them following - she made her way up the dock and out of sight just as they pulled in a few moments later. They barely got the boat next to the dock before Zoro was leaping off onto the pier and rounding on Sanji who was looking up at him in surprise.

“I’ll follow her.” Zoro ordered, casting a glance to Sanji, “You return the boat and find Kohza; bring him here. Alright?!”

“Wh--”

Sea sprayed and wind rustled, the dishevelled man looked up at him with wide unwavering eyes and a moue of concern on his perfect lips. Never looking more perfect, Zoro ran forward and tangled his hands in unruly blond curls and dragged him forward to cut off the rest of his question. The kiss was short and hard – just a pressing of lips – but it was all Zoro had time to afford before he was leaping back and leaving a stunned Sanji staring up at him. Zoro wasn’t even sure he himself fully registered what had just happened as he ordered, “Go!”

“Uh...”

“Go!” Zoro urged, taking off down the dock before he could fully registered what he had just done.

~X~
Getting away from the dock, he made his way into the main area of the shipping center as distant voices had him slowing warily. Crouching low behind the wheel of a truck, he surveyed the area as best he could from his vantage point as the entire area seemed to be crawling with people. An odd place for Kalifa to lead him as something was beginning to feel off.

Several warehouses were crammed into the compound that was heavily fenced off aside from the gated entrance and the single dock crammed into the fishing warehouse along the shore. Despite all the grocery branding slapped across every vehicle and warehouse wall, it was apparent very quickly that the whole area was a front for something more; whether it was drugs, weapons, or trafficking had yet to be seen.

A large truck idled on a loading dock at the rear of a nearby warehouse and was being loaded with large pallets of a concealed substance. Judging from the men with guns loitering around the vehicle, Zoro’s assumptions that the product was illegal was most likely correct. Which only served to make the situation that much more complicated.

Continuing to carefully scan the yard, he eventually caught sight of Kalifa and watched as she ducked inside the entrance to one of the larger buildings on the complex. Staying as discreet as possible, Zoro began to slowly make his way through the place as quietly as he could. Eventually getting to the other side without conflict before finding his goal being inconveniently blocked.

Staying low behind a piece of loading equipment, he could see two men casually loitering outside the entrance of the building Kalifa was inside. While their posture was relaxed, it was clear they were set out front to watch the place. Which was only confirming Zoro’s suspicions that Kalifa was involved with something more than just trying to kill him.

Considering how many people were on the lot, he didn’t want to fire his weapon - especially since he only had a couple rounds that he might need later - and began inspecting the area for a way to get the drop on both of the men without letting them alert anyone. A tool shed attached to the main part of the building was his best bet, though it would require a decent leap and no room for error.

Quietly making his way around the area unnoticed until he got to the back of the shed, glancing up with distaste as he was in no mood to climb in his injured state. Shaking out his gradually seizing arm, he huffed out a quiet breath before leaping up and grabbing the edge of the building and pulling himself up. He could feel the wound in his arm tearing open from where it had congealed and was bleeding freely once more as he righted himself and shuffled across the roof.

He took several moments to gauge the distance he’d need to jump and the movements of the guards he was going to take out. Taking a final cursory glance around the yard to make sure no one could see him, Zoro pushed himself to his feet and leaped off the ledge. Landing directly behind one of the guards and clamping his hand across the man’s mouth as his other hand shot out to smack over the mouth of the second guard effectively cutting any chance of a yell short.

Everything happened in a manner of seconds as Zoro took the guards shock to his advantage and kicked the legs out from under one of the men and sent all of them to the ground. One hand still clamped over the closest guard’s mouth, he swung his leg over the second and maneuvered him into a choke hold, thigh now muffling any chance of a yell. His now free hand came up to grasp the guard currently in his arms and expertly twisted his head until a sharp crack and a choked gurgle had him slumping in a lifeless heap.

Silence only broken by slight scuffling and the panicked mumble of the guard still in Zoro’s leg lock; before he even had a chance to respond Zoro was releasing the hold and grabbing the other guard’s head, twisting in the same fashion. He felt the man tense against his chest for a frightening moment before going eerily lax and Zoro had to fight to ignore the shiver of unpleasantness that ran through
his body, the motion stirring dark memories. Forcing them down, he allowed the lifeless body to fall from his grasp before pushing himself back onto his feet. Dusting off his pants after the small scuffle, he took a minute to shove both bodies into the tool shed near the entrance before drawing his gun and ducking inside the warehouse. He closed the door softly behind himself as he was faced with a dimly lit interior and the horrifying reality of what he had just stumbled upon.

Thousands of pallets lined the inside of the massive building, packed into tightly ordered rows as their cargo was heavily wrapped in multiple layers of clear plastic. Large bricks of similarly packed product was stacked within and Zoro had a sinking suspicion he knew what saw inside. Placing a hand to the large stack of product, he pushed against the packaging to find it give way just enough that his worse thought was being confirmed.

A warehouse this massive, stocked with this much cocaine had to belong to a drug cartel. And this was only one warehouse of the many on this lot. Whatever vendetta Kalifa had against him, this was something so much bigger than Zoro had ever assumed he’d be getting involved in. A cartel this big would have hundreds of more players than just Kalifa, but could possibly explain where Kalifa had the connections and money to put a bounty on him. Which meant Zoro was in a much deeper situation than he had ever guessed he would be.

Ducking down a poorly lit path, he leaned back against the large pallet of cocaine with a soft exhale as he took a moment to regroup his thoughts. Gaze dropping to his gun, he released the magazine to quickly count how many bullets he had before re-inserting it.

Twelve shots. He had twelve shots - plus three spare mags - to his advantage while potentially going up against an entire cartel, and even he wasn’t stupid enough to think he could take them all on with just that. His best bet would be to get out while he could and warn Kohza before he arrived and they could maybe get the cartel taken down without any casualties… however Kalifa would be long gone by then...

“--find him. I want him alive, remember that.” Kalifa’s cool voice cut across the vast warehouse. Zoro continued down a long row of pallets as her voice became clearer, “He’s already injured; you kill him and I’ll make you wish you were dead. Clear?”

Indistinct muttering followed as Zoro snuck a peak around a stack of pallets to find a group of men gathered in clearing next to a loading bay. The door was shut but they were all looking up at a platform that jutted high off the wall that a set of stairs led up to. An office was visible through the open door, but the point of interest was the woman leaning over the railing looking down on the men.

There were twenty-three men which meant he could easily even the playing field, but it just might be one of the dumbest ideas he had had to date. However, Kalifa wanted him alive for some unholy reason, and that was a bartering chip he wasn’t going to pass up. Plus, he tended to get lucky in horribly outnumbered situations and he’d just kissed the man he loved so he felt kinda invincible at the moment.

Keeping his thoughts on Sanji, he stepped out from behind the pallet and let muscle memory do the work for him. Finger working the trigger in quick succession as he rounded the room and emptied the mag before any of the men had a chance to react. Twelve shots, twelve bodies. As the corpses hit the floor Zoro ejected the empty mag and slammed the next one in.

Cocking the gun, he got several more shots in before the remaining men jumped into action. Guns drawn and trained on him as he rounded his own on Kalifa; ignoring the remaining men, keeping his
finger on the trigger as he looked up at his wife.

Kalifa gave an irritated huff, “That was unnecessary.”

“Not to me.” Zoro growled, before continuing, “You wanted to talk; here I am. Why don’t you get rid of your lackeys?”

Kalifa seemed to honestly mull it over for a few moments, gloved hands leaving the railing to cross casually over her chest as her bottom lip jutted out. Ruby red lipstick glinting in the stale overhead lamp as her gaze was so eerily reminiscent of when she used to look at him playfully. A moment later turning cold as she hummed, “Mmm. No. You go through Kaku first if you wanna talk.”

Glancing down, one of the thugs that he hadn’t shot was stepping forward, already holstering his weapon as Zoro glanced back up at Kalifa. Gun still trained on her, he drawled in disbelief, “You can’t be serious.”

“I gave you a chance to come willingly and you threw a bottle at my head; now we play my way.” A wicked smile curved Kalifa’s lips as she glanced around the remaining men who had their guns trained on him, “You play; or it’s game over.”

Exhausted eyes shifting from the gun in his hand to the man standing in front of him, Zoro’s shoulders dropped heavily as he accepted her terms. She may want him alive, but he knew if he pushed her too far everything may end far quicker than either of them would like. If giving her a bit of entertainment could stall until Kohza arrived, then so be it.

Tossing his gun aside - not really needing it any more - he turned to face Kaku and slowly raised his arms in a ready stance. Favouring his left due to the multitude of injuries it had sustained, Zoro took a dominant stance with his right and watched warily as Kaku copied his movements. A moment later Kaku was launching forward as he seemed intent on ending this fight quick.

Given his injuries, Zoro opted to play defensively as every time Kaku got close to strike Zoro would either block, or snatch for his wrist and try to sweep his ankle. If he could send the fight to the ground then he may be able to end everything with a quick choke or submission hold. Without any sort of weapon it meant he had to fight smart, but if he got a hold of the man’s neck or one of his joints he could end this without having to injure himself further.

A well placed strike connected with the still healing gash to his side and sent Zoro down onto one knee as stars danced in front of his vision. Kaku took the opportunity to aim a rather vicious punch down for Zoro’s injured shoulder. Zoro reacted in time as his palm caught Kaku’s wrist and redirected the punch away as he bodily turned into the blond, standing as he used Kaku’s momentum to flip him over and send him sprawling on the ground at Zoro’s feet with a rather harsh smack.

Even after sending him to the ground, Kaku lashed out immediately, fist coming up and connecting with Zoro’s body with a solid thwack of flesh on flesh - knuckles connecting perfectly with the stitches along his hip and the still healing wound. Wheezing a pained gasp, Zoro released Kaku, allowing the man the reprieve he needed to place his hands behind his head and kick back; using the momentum to pop back onto his feet and charge Zoro.

Each strike from there on out was much more carefully placed and Zoro was having a harder and harder time blocking as his fatigue and blood loss was beginning to catch up with him. A few poorly blocked hits and clipped shots were wearing him out concerningly fast and he could tell he was reaching his limit a lot faster than he had when he was younger.

A final knee to the gut sent Zoro to the ground in a pained heap as the wind was knocked out of him
in spectacular fashion. Several pathetic gasps finally managed to get air into his lungs and he was able to feebly push himself to his hands and knees where his opponent leered down at him.

“The rumours are true...” Kaku chuckled, “You have lost your touch.”

Reigning in his panted breaths, Zoro cast a look around at the remaining goons that were watching the fight with nothing short of glee on their faces. Blinking heavily, Zoro turned his sights back up to Kaku who still stood cockily over him as he was clearly waiting for Zoro to get back to his feet so he could get the opportunity to punch him back down.

Gaze falling to where his hands were splayed across the gritty cement of the warehouse, he felt his whole body ache simultaneously with every injury that was hounding it; old and new. Every bullet wound and lacerated scar twinging, and his fresh one's pulsing hot flames. The wound to his side stung much the same as the bullet wound to his shoulder and arm, the irritated cuts to his palms itching from the gravel that was currently being dug into them; everything hurt at once and it sparked a fresh wave of irritation in him that had him back on his feet.

Arms lax at his sides, he watched Kaku with utter contempt. Zoro was officially done with all of this bullshit. This drug lord lackey was the last thing between him and the person that could effectively end this stupid game of cat and mouse. And he was ready to finish all of this now.

Slowly raising his arms in front of him once more, he sent the man a murderous look from under his sweat drenched brow as multiple onlookers hooted and hollered excitedly at the prospect of watching their boss knock him down again. Adjusting his feet, Zoro waited patiently as he began blocking everything out around him and readied himself to finish the fight.

Kaku’s mouth was moving, but Zoro didn’t bother to register whatever snide comments he had. Instead using the moment to steady himself until he saw the man step forward once more and the fight had resumed. Keeping on the defensive, he focused on any patterns to the man’s strikes while carefully landing a few of his own.

Dodging each hit and kick Kaku threw at him, he sidestepped a final strike and snatched the man’s wrist as he hooked Kaku’s ankle with his foot. Sending Kaku to the ground with his arm pinned behind his back, his lack of response telling of his own shock at the situation. Using it to his advantage, Zoro reached out and gladly took the other wrist as well and pulled both arms straight back behind Kaku.

Placing a foot firmly in the man's back, he pulled the arms back as he let his rage get the best of him. Feeling one shoulder release with a sickening pop - a yelp of pain rang through the air - he reefed harder and attempted to dislocate the other arm as well.

A motion behind him had him releasing Kaku with a swift kick as he turned and snatched the wrist of the thug who was about to put a blade in Zoro’s back. Tackling the man to the ground, he twisted the knife around and drove it into the man’s chest with one hand on the handle and the other pressing against the pommel. The guard set flush against the man’s chest just as Zoro got a good look at him and found himself freezing in horror.

A kid.

The man couldn’t have been much older than eighteen and regardless of why he had ended up in this gang he looked up at Zoro with the wide, terrified eyes of a child. Pupils shaking with panic as he began to register the pain of the knife in his chest and Zoro finally felt something break inside himself as he saw that haunted look and saw his own eighteen year old self reflected there. On a battlefield, covered in blood, not ready for what he had signed up for...
Whatever adrenaline, or self-preservation, that had been in place to keep him from losing control snapped and in an instant it all came crashing down on him. Breathing cut short, he released the knife with trembling hands and crawled off the kid to kneel in the dirt as he gasped for air. His body shook uncontrollably as reality slipped away and all of his worst memories played out vividly in his mind. Friends and colleagues blown to pieces, everyone he had ever killed, Kuina’s soft, smiling face...

Not good.

Voices spiralled above him as he barely could keep himself on his knees, swift footsteps strode towards him as he tried raising a hand to defend himself. Hand easily swatted away, something dark was thrust down and connected with the side of his temple. The crack followed by the splattering of blood on the stone floor was enough to effectively end Zoro’s episode as he was knocked unconscious.

TBC…
An Eye For An Eye

Chapter Notes

Just wanted to thank all of you for reading this far! I don't know if this is the ending you were expecting; if you wanted something more climatic, or less, but regardless I hope you enjoyed! The epilogue is still to come, but I wanted to thank you all anyway! I was oddly stressed about this chapter as I haven't finished many multiple chapters and I hope it properly wraps up everything (if something feels left unfinished let me know so I can try to edit it in later. thank you!) As I said, there's still the epilogue to look forward to. So, hopefully see you there!
It had been a long time since Zoro had had to struggle awake through a pounding headache that had
been the result of getting slammed in the head with the butt of a rifle. Yet, here he was blinking through a haze of pain and inflammation along his brow after one of Kalifa's men had gotten the drop on him and introduced him to a face full of metal. The swelling over one of his eyes was already doing a fantastic job of keeping the lid partially shut and the crusty sensation of dried blood confirmed his suspicion that the skin had been broken.

Giving a final shake of his head, he managed to raise his gaze to take in his bearings and realize that the situation was not looking great. Hands tied behind his back with an expertly cinched knot, and his ankles tied similarly to the legs of the sturdy steel chair he was currently strapped to. Alone in the middle a room as the dim lighting of the large lights overhead illuminated the office he had been taken to.

It was rather well kept for a cartel warehouse; rich wooden furniture, lavish curtains despite the lack of windows, and a large ornate rug which he currently found himself on; the only piece of furniture that didn’t fit in with the whole space which had the eerily familiar smell to the woman it belonged to.

Trying not to dwell on it too much, he instead went about starting to plan how to escape from this drastically worsening situation. Twisting his wrists in an attempt to loosen the ropes in hopes of getting his hands free before matters could get any worse.

As though to mock his own inner monologue, the clicking of heels upon the stairs announced the arrival of his captor. Halting his fidgeting long enough to look up through his half swollen eye to see his wife approaching from the doorway. Shutting the door behind herself, gaze turning to his, she smirked, “Finally awake, honey?”

Zoro grunted.

“Sorry I can't provide better accommodations, but this'll be over real quick,” Kalifa gestured about the cluttered space with a vague wave as she sauntered further into the room. Taking a place in front of her desk and leaning against it casually before turning her sharp gaze to Zoro as she assured with a sincere moue, “I have to go home and prepare for my husband's funeral after all.”

Zoro's scowl darkened.

“Oh, come now.” Kalifa purred as she shook her head, “Don't look at me like that... You knew this was coming.”

“Obviously not.” The word was barked out with a strained grunt as he jerked forward in his chair in an attempt to break the bonds keeping him at her mercy. Tensing his arms a few more times futilely before ceasing his struggling and scowling, “You think I'd be here if I knew?”

Kalifa gifted him with a raised eyebrow.

Meeting her unwavering gaze, Zoro refused to speak first as he glared up at her, betrayal pulsating through his veins. Even if their passion for each other hadn’t faded long ago, it took almost nothing to dissociate her from everything she once was. Every warmth about her had turned cold, and each beautiful trait was now ugly, and all he saw was a complete and utter stranger looking down at him. A lifetime of training allowed him to see nothing more than a target.

“Hmm...” Kalifa pouted, “Silent treatment?”

“Why’d you try to kill me?”
“Why do you think I tried to kill you?”

Zoro had to refrain from growling at the games she was already starting - instead casting a look around the office that seemingly belonged to her and was situated at the center of a cartel warehouse. Snorting, he garnered a guess, “Anything to do with this place? Since when do you work for a cartel?”

“Warmer.” Kalifa mused with a bored wave of her hand, “And since always; that little stint with the Italian service was just a cover. A cover you fell for by the way.”

“My mistake.” Zoro grunted, all the pieces starting to fall into place far too easily; from the way she had latched onto him so easily despite how broken he was, to how quickly she accepted the notion of getting married and moving to a small town, and the willingness to ham up the whole housewife act. A sour tang of reality made him sneer, “So I was part of that cover?”

“You're starting to catch on...” Kalifa smirked cheekily before her arms came up to wrap around her waist as she gave a wistful sigh, “I was mainly there because it was quite useful being so easily staged within America, but I admit you had your moments where you could be charming; made me reconsider giving everything up once or twice--”

“That’s all this is?” Zoro interrupted her, not in the mood to hear her ramblings. Zoro wasn’t a stranger to being undercover, and he also wasn’t unfamiliar with being sent in to deal with someone who had violated confidentiality or had run their course of usefulness. A lot of people were dead because he knew they wouldn’t keep their mouth shut; and this was sounding an awful lot like a roundabout explanation that Zoro’s usefulness had run its course, “Tying up loose ends, huh?”

A smug smile pursed Kalifa’s lips, “Basically.”

The silence that followed her admission had an unnerving chill to it as they both stared at each other for a long moment; and the subsequent way this was likely to play out. Zoro tied up and knowing too much, and Kalifa bearing down on him with the full intention of shutting his mouth for good. Only option remaining was to run out the clock and pray Kohza could get to him before it was too late.

“So...” Zoro stalled with a lazy drawl, returning to subtly twisting his wrists to continue with his escape - if he dislocated his thumb he might be able to slip a wrist free... but it would require a better angle so he could get a firm grip on his thumb, “a bounty? Seems unnecessary since you could have just stabbed me in my sleep.”

Kalifa’s cold eyes glittered maliciously, and it almost seemed like he had struck a chord.

“Either tell me,” Zoro groused while shifting a little in his chair, stilling as he felt something in his left rear pocket. It took a second for him to remember it was Sanji’s lighter and he kept his face carefully blank as he hoped that the blond’s smoking habit might just be responsible for saving his life. Flashing a cocky grin, he jabbed, “or get this over with and kill me.”

Kalifa’s lips pursed sourly.

All Zoro did was return the look with a smile, keeping her attention on him as he slowly twisted his hand around until he was able to wheedle the bit of plastic from his pocket. Once in his grasp, he immediately flipped it around and made point of grunting at the same time he struck the flint to mask the sound of the flame sparking to life, “Hmm?”

The furious look on Kalifa’s face was a fair price to pay as he now angled the flame onto the ropes binding his hands together. Cautiously burning the ropes just enough to not cause them to ignite, or
to smoke and alert Kalifa to what he was up to. Sitting a bit more upright to make sure his arms and hands were completely obstructed from her view as she pushed herself away from the desk she had been leaning against and beared down on Zoro.

“Do you know how infuriating it is to resign yourself to a person who's given up on life,” Kalifa snapped, “only to see them flourish with someone else?”

A chill ran down Zoro’s spine as he had a sinking suspicion of what she was alluding to. Despite how well he had thought he had hidden his conflicted feelings, everything no doubt became obvious to her once he had fled the country with Sanji. Attempting to hide his surprise from showing on his face. he asked in mock confusion, “What?”

He must not have concealed it well enough because Kalifa’s face became absolutely predatory and she leaned in with a menacing grin. Hand propping on the back of Zoro’s chair - while Zoro quickly snatched his hand closed around the lighter - sneering down at him, “I think you know exactly whom I’m talking about.”

Everything was falling into place with rather painstaking clarity as Zoro surmised wearily, “That’s why you tried to kill him…”

“Now you’re catching on! As a reward I’ll let you in on a little secret,” Kalifa smirked before announcing rather teasingly, “There was no bounty.”

The admission was enough to warrant a frown and a cautious response, “What do you mean?”

“I mean exactly what I said..” Kalifa repeated, pushing herself away from Zoro and retreated back to her place near her desk, “You were never supposed to leave Merryville. You were supposed to die in that damn apartment with that pathetic man, but you didn't. You took him, and left me behind; that was when I realized I needed to do something more drastic. It all worked out pretty well too - if I do say so myself - your stupidly bold nature made it almost too easy.”

“You…”

“Yes?”

“You've got some nerve.” Zoro growled low, his initial anger over her needless attack on Sanji had morphed into livid indignation over her own hypocrisy, “Accusing me of being unfaithful after everything you did.”

“Please Zoro, you must know me better than that.” Shaking her head in disappointment, “Those men were co-workers, clients. Underlings. But it was far easier to play the facade of the cheating housewife than I had expected. You fell for it so willingly - a little insulting, mind you - but it did the trick, and even better you never said a word to me about it.”

“What?” Zoro balked.

“You heard me.” Kalifa hummed rather tiredly, hand lazily reaching behind her to snag a large dagger off the desk and wield it at Zoro as she scoffed, “The only unfaithful one here is you.”

Zoro had the grace to drop his gaze at her words. Even though she had already tried to kill him multiple times in the past couple hours, he couldn’t help but remember the guilt he had been carrying with him ever since he had realized his feelings for Sanji. And up until now he had been ambivalent about what his feelings for Sanji meant with regards to his wife, but now… Now was the first time he didn’t feel guilty for what he felt. Heart utterly decisive as he looked back at Kalifa with a remorseful smile, “You’re right.”
Kalifa raised an eyebrow in muted surprise.

“But he’s done nothing wrong,” Zoro continued softly, “So leave him out of this. What I’ve done to
hurt you is on me, and me alone.”

“That’s sweet, darling,” Kalifa mused, “but you’re missing the point.”

“How?”

“See, I could handle putting up with all of your issues, and your melodramatic mood swings. Even the whole rural, backcountry town thing wasn’t the deal breaker; it was actually a rather comfy life that made it easier for me to work. But...” Kalifa's happy musings turning dark as she turned a murderous expression on Zoro and spat, “what I could not abide was being tossed aside like some used tissue for some fucking plebeian hick.”

“I wasn’t going to leave yo--”

“You think that matters?”

“What do you want then?” Zoro asked carefully, trying to keep her talking longer as he felt the flame beginning to work through the first few coils of the rope around his wrists. Skin along his palms blistered painfully, but masking the pain with a grimace, he noted, “You're clearly keeping me alive for a reason.”

“Always the perceptive one,” Kalifa crooned, “I did love that about you.”

Another coil gave way as Zoro kept his gaze locked onto the woman currently stalking towards him, eyes nervously falling to the blade she had held casually in her grasp. Keeping his breathing calm, he knew nothing good was going to come out of what she was possibly planning.

When she came to stop in front of him, he released the lighter and let the flame flicker out as he couldn't risk her smelling the burnt rope or seeing the live flame. Curling the lighter into his grasp and holding it tightly, he looked up at the woman with a steady glare. Face impassive, she placed her free hand placatingly on his shoulder as she stepped forward to lightly straddle his lap.

“Remember our first time?” Kalifa mused with a teasing wriggle of her hips, one hand draping across his shoulders and playfully running up into his hair. The other staying unsettling by her side with the blade still in its grasp as she purred, “I believe we did it in this same position. In this exact city...”

“Vaguely.” Zoro noted with a wary grunt.

For a moment, her face softened as though remembering the night – Zoro admittedly recalling the memory just as fondly – however the recollection losing its sentimentality considering their current position. Something maniacal sparkled in her eyes as she was brought back to the present just as Zoro was and she declared rather sharply, “So...”

“Hm?”

“You let your little... eyes... wander...” Kalifa pointed out with teasing taps to the skin just below Zoro’s eyes with each caress of her finger. Proposing rather calmly, “I figure you should compensate me fairly.”

A chill ran down Zoro's spine.

“How does the old adage go?” Rising to her feet, she towered over him as her hand twisted sharply
in his hair and reefed his head back with a vicious jerk. Zoro gritted his teeth through the pain, forcing an eye open through a wince before going rigid as he watched Kalifa raise her other hand and the blade poised menacingly in it. “An eye for an eye, was it?”

A desperate struggle lasted only a second before he was wailing loudly as the knife slashed across his face with wicked precision and he felt the tip slice flesh, bone, and eye. Managing to clamp down his scream a moment later as the pain knocked him breathless and nausea rose in his gut. The act of simply keeping the eye lid shut over the wound hurt nearly as much as the initial cut itself and he felt his consciousness swimming dangerously.

He was hardly aware of Kalifa's hand untangling from his hair, only later realizing he was free as he was able to let his head hang low and the stream of blood could trail into his lap. Hot, sticky garnet pools soaked the heavy fabric of his pants. Left eye inflamed, he slowly managed to crack his right eye open despite the pain screaming across his face. Glaring up at Kalifa as ragged breath, after ragged breath was wheezed between gritted teeth.

“Fun?”

“Loads.” Zoro managed thickly, spitting a wad of blood from his mouth that had trailed down his face to get caught on his tongue. Flexing his arms as much as he could and finding the ropes barely budging as he was truly trapped in his position if he didn't do something quickly.

Flipping the lighter back into his grasp, he flicked the flame back into life and put it under the ropes once more. Panting through the searing pain as the flames began to catch and burn rope and flesh in his rush to get his arms free. Grateful that the pain in his eye was an excellent cover for the grimace he had as he felt his skin around his wrists burning viciously.

Kalifa still thankfully ignorant as she smiled wickedly and stepped forward again, “Ready for round two?”

This time Zoro allowed himself to break and snarl at her.

“That first one was for me, but I think this next one will be purely out of spite.” Kalifa chuckled, “Call me petty, but I can’t get the image of you looking at that damn man so sweetly out of my head.”

As Kalifa stepped forward, knife poised readily in her hand, Zoro felt the final chord of the ropes give way and he immediately wrenched his arms forward and tore the ropes free. One hand still clenching Sanji's lighter, the other shot out to knab the knife from Kalifa's startled grasp and level it on her readily. Patting out the last flames still eating at the fabric of his sleeves, he untangled the last of the ropes and tossed them aside before levelling on Kalifa with a dark glare.

“Wha--?!” Kalifa balked with livid disbelief as Zoro held up the lighter he had still been holding onto for her to see, watching as he gaze flickered wearily to it from the before her eyes widening a fraction before seething, “Jaybura, that absolute idiot. I told him to check your pockets.”

“Seemed sloppy of you.” Pocketing the lighter, he kept his distance between them as he commented, “Should’ve killed me when you had the chance.”

Snarling in disgust, Kalifa's leg snapped up to peg him in the chest and as he took a step back to deflect the blow he found his legs still bound to the chair and he was sent sprawling backwards. Wind knocked out of him as he fumbled the knife in his grasp, still choking on air as he sat up and cut himself free while Kalifa darted for the gun resting on her desk.
A bullet embedded into the flooring where Zoro’s head had been a moment earlier as the ropes around his ankles fell and he rolled off the chair. Arm snapping out, he whipped the knife at Kalifa. It sunk into the wall with a solid thwack as his depth perception was horribly thrown off by his missing eye, but the distraction was just enough to allow him to dart forward, duck under Kalifa’s extended arm, and bodily tackle her back onto the desk.

Snarling through the fall, her leg came up to kick him hard in the side and use the momentum of their fall to send Zoro flailing over top and to crash into the chair on the other side, but not before snatching the gun from her grasp. They were both back on their feet at the same time, a murderous look twisting Kalifa’s face into something ugly as Zoro held her gun aloft with a smarmy grimace. Popping the magazine free, he hucked the cartridge across the room, easily disassembling the weapon as he stalked around the desk towards Kalifa murderously. Adrenaline kept the pain muted as he tossed different pieces of the gun aside until there was nothing left in his hands and he was standing in front of his wife with a dark scowl.

Kalifa met it with her own, “Don’t even have the guts to shoot me, huh?”

Without a second of hesitation Kalifa’s leg was lashing out and slamming into Zoro’s injured side, a sadistic snarl alight on her face even though Zoro could tell she was panicking. Arm clamping down on the limb to keep her from withdrawing where her long range attacks would be more useful, he sent her to the ground with a well placed kick to her other leg.

Using his weight to keep her pinned - and breathless enough to keep from crying out for help - a struggle between them began as Zoro attempted to get a proper choke hold on her while she fought back with everything she had. Tumbling across the floor, Zoro’s arms were occupied keeping her from embedding a heel into his chest that he couldn’t quite block her from taking a vice grip on his shoulder. Long nail digging into his shoulder, he could feel her slicing through the stitches and the healing flesh with ease as he grunted through the new onslaught of pain.

Releasing one of her legs, he nabbed her wrist and wrenched her hand away from where she was attempting to rip open his shoulder. Using the extended arm as leverage to roll her over and pin her hard to the ground, he snatched up the discarded rope lying on the floor beside them.

Managing to get her wrists together, he swiftly wrapped the spare pieces of rope around them before cinching it tight, then proceeded to do the same to her ankles. All the while, Kalifa struggled against her bounds as she seethed venomously, “I take it back! I hated every moment of that life we had!”

Zoro ignored her ravings, knowing now that none of it mattered. Anything she had to say now would just be meant to hurt him; she had already said her piece earlier and he knew what she thought. Regardless of how fake she had perceived their relationship, she’d never forgive him for the feelings he had developed for someone else; this wasn’t something words could fix.

Pulling the black rag free from his arm, he managed to fit it into her mouth despite her shrieking and writhing. Muffling any chance of her calling for help as he tied the ends tightly behind her head. Giving the knot a final tug, he released her and turned back to her other bonds.

Once he finished checking the last of the knots keeping her restrained, Zoro fell back on his rear in a near daze as the blood loss that had been accumulating since that afternoon was finally hitting him. Head spinning, he tiredly wrestled the remnants of his shirt over his head so he could bundle it up and press it against his still bleeding eye.

Trying to staunch the flow, he realized he was too far gone to leave her and go get help, which meant there was nothing left for him to do but sit and wait, stop the bleeding as best he could, and
hope that Sanji would be able to find Kohza and get to the right warehouse in time. Though he supposed if things got especially grim, he wasn’t above crawling out of the building and wave down some help; the exertion might pump the last of his available blood out of him however.

Kalifa’s enraged squirming had Zoro’s one good eye flicking over to look at her, anger long since deflated as he felt nothing but pity; remorse over wasting so much of her time, and sadness that this is where they had had to end up just to finally admit it should be over...

“You know...” Zoro mused, his softly spoken words drowned out by Kalifa's muffled screaming, words trailing off as his gaze fell to the floor beneath his legs. Bloody hand dangled from where it rested on his thigh as he realized just how exhausted he finally was. Not just from the blood loss, but from everything.

He was so damned tired.

Tired of the constant adrenaline, death, and never-ending betrayal of his former life, tired of his mediocre attempt at retirement where he had just sat in a miasma of self-loathing, and he was tired of thinking everything would get better if he could just cure what was wrong with him. All he wanted was to finally put all of this behind him and rest... and he had a pretty good idea where that would start.

Kalifa's growling tapered off and Zoro pulled himself from his blood loss induced musings to look at her as her cold eyes narrowed on him angrily. Smiling sadly, everything Zoro hadn't had the ability to say before was finally falling from him unprompted.

“I didn't want that life any more than you did...” Zoro admitted, adjusting the blood soaked shirt he kept pressed against his eye, the sopping cloth squishing in his grasp as he muttered regretfully, “But I realize now that it wasn't that life that I didn't want...”

Memories of the past couple weeks of summer he had spent before this had all happened played out in his head as he realized they were probably some of the happiest he had ever had in his life. Nights at the alley with the crew after a shift where they got far too rambunctious for a bunch of adults that had just worked a double shift, or down at the lake in the summer sun as Usopp's boys made a decent attempt at drowning him.

Or that humid evening where he had stood out on the back porch under the orange twilight as a thick scent of charcoal and barbecue hovered in the air. Leaning against the railing with Sanji as they had just quietly enjoyed the silence of each others company. Hand tightening painfully at the memory, causing blood to ooze from the cloth and trail down his arm in thick rivulets, a melancholy smile touched his lips.

“...it was you.”

All Zoro got in response was an unimpressed hiss.

“It took me far too long to realize...” Zoro amended with a bit of remorse – both for her, and the time he had wasted for himself. Dismissing his reminiscing, he turned a serious gaze onto her once more, “So... I guess it is my fault. Sorry 'bout that...”

Despite being muffled, Kalifa's words where very audible as she huffed around her gag. “Fuck you!”

Zoro said nothing.

There really wasn't anything else to say anymore.
A door to the warehouse slammed open – effectively ending the silence between them – both of them turning to the office door and steeling themselves for whomever had arrived and would seal the doom of the other. There was a long silence before muted footsteps on the staircase sounded the arrival of multiple people making their way towards the office. A moment later, the door was kicked in and a man rounded the corner with his gun raised and his body low.

Upon seeing Zoro his stance immediately eased and he straightened while holstering his gun. Waving a relaxed signal to the men behind him, Kohza made his way forward with several SWAT members right behind him. Others were already moving back down the stairs and locking down the rest of the building while Kohza came to a stop in front of Zoro. His gaze flickered from where Kalifa was tied up, to the pool of blood forming underneath Zoro, and the rag held to his face before commenting.

“Rough day?” Kohza grinned.

A derisive snort was all Kohza got in response.

~X~

Once more Zoro found himself sitting in a chair across from two agents who watched him wearily from behind the lenses of their reflective shades. However, this time Zoro found himself much less agitated as he sat back in his chair comfortably while staring down the men patiently. Despite the situation, Zoro had a feeling that he wasn't in as much trouble as the agents were insinuating; if he really was then he would’ve had his wrists cuffed by now. And they certainly wouldn’t be having this briefing in the conference room of a local inn.

They had been put up in a rather luxurious hotel, with a broad view of the city and harbour below – most likely to make up for the lock-down they currently had on everyone involved – and had kept Sanji rather occupied for the past couple days. Zoro, on the other hand, had spent the last few days in a Croatian hospital being treated for his wounds before immediately being transferred to the inn for his briefing; he hadn’t seen Sanji since he had rather brashly kissed him and run off.

“I hope you realize... Roronoa...” The one agent stated with cautious annoyance, “that in any other situation you would be court martialed and never see the light of day again.”

Zoro said nothing.

“I mean...” Flipping open a folder that lay on the mahogany table in front of him, the agent perused through several documents that were contained within. Making a show of thumbing through the papers as he began listing off everything that had taken place in the last two weeks, “Falsified documentation, illegal entry into several countries, multiple accounts of homicide, killing without a permit, the list goes on...”

Again. Nothing.

“Fortunately for you,” The man continued begrudgingly, “the department is incredibly satisfied with the circumstances that led to the discovery of the Water Seven Cartel. So for your silence they are willing to let this incident go... As far as the state is concerned; this was a matter of marital incivility. On official record Kohza is responsible for the discovery of the cartel.”

Inclining his head, Zoro accepted the terms wilfully. Already the situation sounding much more promising than he had initially thought it would. However, they still hadn’t mentioned Sanji, or anyone else for that matter, all of whom were honestly still his major concern at this point.
“You were not aware you were at the cartel, you were not aware your wife was affiliated with the cartel, and you were not responsible for any deaths within the cartel.” The first agent cited off firmly, head tilting down momentarily to check his notes before continuing, “An anonymous tip lead our black-ops team to your location where the cartel was effectively neutralized, you were found captive, and Kalifa Roronoa was taken into custody. Our grounds to search the premises was due to the capture, imprisonment, and torture of a retired agent; you. Is that all clear?”

Zoro nodded, “Yes.”

“In regards to your wife,” A new folder was pulled from the stack and slapped down onto the table before being flipped open rather aggressively, “she will be charged with international drug trafficking, multiple accounts of homicide, kidnapping, and several other offenses. The Croatian government has permitted her to be released into our custody; you are not permitted to be in contact with her. Understand?”

“Yes.”

“As for the matter of Mr. Vinsmoke...” With a third folder being pulled from the pile, Zoro perked up slightly at the mention of the other man. Watching carefully as the agent opened the file and began riffling through several pages for the document he was looking for.

“It's my fault he was involved.” Zoro declared unprompted before the man had a chance to speak, “And he did nothing wrong; he should have no repercussions.”

Pausing in his work, the agent seemed to evaluate Zoro’s sudden inclination to speak before turning back to the file and finally pulling free the page he was looking for. Laying it on top, Zoro could see a majority of the writing was blacked out already to keep sensitive information hidden, but couldn’t make out anything useful on what was going to happen to him.

“Mr. Vinsmoke is, thankfully, unaware of the cartel; as far as he is concerned, your wife just had a vendetta.” Sunglasses glinting in the light, he added, “I suggest we leave it at that.”

“Fine.” Zoro agreed easily, he had kept far worse secrets for them before and this was just another in a long line he’d like to forget. “What about back home?”

“Mr. Vinsmoke's affairs have all been put in order; given the somewhat public nature of your situation, we have no other choice than to keep the original story,” Clearing his throat, the agent shifted in his chair before continuing, “Due to your… relationship to Mr. Vinsmoke, your wife was responsible for the attempt on his life.

The second agent began riffling through some other records before pulling them free and sliding them across the table to corroborate their claims. “While his insurance should cover his costs we are willing to accommodate him if the need be.”

Zoro gave the document a cursory glance, but it seemed everything was exactly as the agents had said. In fact, it seemed the agents hadn’t gotten nearly as much insight to everything that had happened as he had suspected they would. But if it was all resolved then there was no reason to correct any of the minor information. Sliding the document back towards them as he asked, “Is that all?”

“There is still the small matter of the international bounty in circulation that we are attempting to revoke. Until all the details get sorted I suggest you return to your room and wait there.” The agent ordered as he pulled a card key free from his front lapel pocket. Handing it off to Zoro as he informed, “We'll come get you once everything is completed and proper transportation has been
arranged to take you home.”

Snagging the key from the man’s grasp, Zoro took that as a dismissal and promptly pushed himself from his chair. Making for the door as he absently noted the room number on the key before pocketing it so he’d be able open the door with his still good arm. He was about to throw the door open before one of the agents behind him piped up rather tiredly.

“Also, Roronoa?”

Keeping the door held ajar, Zoro cast a glance back at the agent with a cocked brow.

A rather exhausted, but humorous, expression sat on the man’s face as he remarked, “This is not what I meant when I told you to settle down.”

“Trust me,” Zoro replied scathingly, “this was not my intention either.”

With only a nod of recognition, Zoro turned his back on both of them and exited into the deserted hallway as he sincerely hoped he’d never have to go through another briefing like that ever again. He was lucky enough everything had worked out so well for himself - and for Sanji, Kohza, and Stussy - that he didn’t think he’d ever want to risk that again.

Making his way down the hall towards the room Sanji had been put up in, Zoro's steps remained slow as his body was still recovering from everything it had been subjected to. Body covered in bandages and gauze for the myriad of injuries all over his body; damaged shoulder supported by a sling and a large bandage taped over the massive scar that now would permanently replace his left eye.

Finally reaching the room Sanji was currently confined to, Zoro paused for several moments outside as he wondered where he was supposed to even begin with the other man. What he was supposed to say? How on earth he was going to explain his injuries? But most of all, he kept replaying that kiss over and over in his mind and hoped it hadn’t crossed the line for Sanji.

Palms sweaty, he shook himself before grabbing the handle and pushing into the rather quaint room – decorated with a mixture of modern furniture and holistic art – currently smelling like an ashtray. The reason behind that became readily apparent as Zoro spotted an overflowing ashtray perched on the table, and a rather irritable looking blond sitting beside it. Ankle on knee, hand on thigh, other hand holding a cigarette to his lips and puffing on it like he had a death wish via smoke inhalation.

As the door finished opening, Zoro stood for a few moments, waiting until Sanji was pulled from his thoughts and fully registered the arrival as Zoro and not some federal agent. Nearly dropping his smoke, he sprang to his feet, only to freeze seconds later as he watched Zoro warily; eyes skittering over his appearance and the no doubt multiple new injuries he had garnered.

Gently closing the door behind himself, Zoro remained where he stood as he wasn’t entirely sure what he was supposed to do next. After days, they were finally alone, and all of this from here on in was completely new, unexplored territory for him and it had him utterly petrified.

Despite everything that had happened between them in the last few days, a tension remained that he could see throughout Sanji's body; watching Zoro with an anxious gaze. Forcing himself into motion, Zoro made his way over to where Sanji stood – who was still holding a cigarette between lax fingers as he watched him approach quietly.

Zoro came to stop in front of Sanji, unsure of what exactly to start with – especially considering their last interaction had been a kiss and a barked order – hand awkwardly sliding into his pockets. One
hand finding the lighter that he had used to free himself and immediately pulled it out, offering it to the blond with a soft murmur, “Yours.”

Sanji reached out and snagged the small bit of plastic and metal, fingers brushing across Zoro’s for a moment before retracting and curling around the lighter tensely. Shoulders rising in an heavy breath before he replied with an exhausted exhale, “Lemme take a look at their patch job.”

Arguing seemed out of the question, so he followed Sanji to the small table in the corner of the room and took a seat as Sanji grabbed his own and positioned it in front of him before falling in it. Zoro pointedly ignored the way Sanji’s legs fit inside his and the warmth leeching through the denim that he could very noticeably feel against the inside of his thighs.

Grinding out his cigarette on the pile, Sanji studiously cleaned his hands before turning to Zoro and with careful hands removed the bandage as painlessly as he could manage, but despite his professionalism Zoro could immediately see the horror in the blond's eyes. Self-directed hatred and abominable distraught were clear on the blond's face as Zoro knew without a doubt Sanji had already decided to blame himself; it was part of the reason he hadn't wanted Sanji to ever see the mark.

“...They...” Sanji’s hands lowered gently, bandage still held in a quivering grip as he stared up at the jagged laceration now running the length of Zoro’s face. Neat stitches held the skin in place, and pinned his unsalvageable eye permanently shut. Sanji’s voice cracked audibly as his gaze finally fell away and his head dropped as he murmured, “They did a good job.”

Zoro's hand came up to snag Sanji's retreating wrist in a sharp hold, jerking harshly to get Sanji to look back up at him in surprise. Pained eyes full of guilt met Zoro’s as his initial reaction faded, and the longer he looked at Sanji’s hurt expression the more it wore him down.

Zoro ordered, his soft tone turning his request into more of a plea, the situation already becoming far harder for him than he had initially expected. Hating the way he could see Sanji visibly blaming himself, hating that he could never take the wound back, hating that he could probably never stop Sanji from ever fully thinking it wasn't his fault.

Sanji was far less passive as he shrewdly demanded, “Like what?”

Turning his gaze away, Zoro stared out the bay windows of the hotel for several moments, feeling Sanji’s wrist slip from between his slack fingers. Eventually looking back at Sanji, his statement coming out more as a groan, “Like this hurts you more than it did me.”

“Don't look at me like that...” Zoro ordered, his soft tone turning his request into more of a plea, the situation already becoming far harder for him than he had initially expected. Hating the way he could see Sanji visibly blaming himself, hating that he could never take the wound back, hating that he could probably never stop Sanji from ever fully thinking it wasn't his fault.

Sanji clearly tried to put more force to his words, but it came out more as a choked growl.

“This would’ve happened either way,” Zoro shook his head hopelessly, remembering Stussy’s words as he tried to placate the other man. Regardless if their positions were reversed, Sanji shouldn't blame himself for something that was going to happen if he was there or not. “Don't you dare feel sorry for me.”

“But...”

“But nothing.” Zoro cut Sanji off as some of his resolution returned. Snatching up Sanji’s hand in his once more and holding tight to make sure Sanji would understand how serious he was, “I don't regret a single thing; not as long as you're still alive.”

“I'm not an idiot, Zoro.” Even though Sanji didn’t attempt to pull his hand away, Zoro could tell from the lax posture that Sanji still wasn’t being swayed by Zoro’s words. Hardened eyes meeting
Zoro’s, he muttered, “I know why all of this happened.”

“And I’d do it again.” Zoro blurted out rather callously, leaning in as his grip tightened earnestly and tried to force Sanji to understand his feelings through physical contact alone, “All of it. Even if it came to the same outcome, or worse.”

A myriad of fluxing emotions danced across Sanji’s face. Eyes fighting between hopelessness and infuriation while his lips tightened and drew down, wrestling to keep his obviously gritted teeth from showing. It seemed like he was caught between being touched by Zoro’s words, and absolutely emotionally devastated by them. And Zoro was unsure what he could say that wouldn’t just make matters worse.

Finally settling on a painfully blank expression, Sanji murmured, “Do you remember what I said in India?”

Zoro blanked.

Of all the things he had been expecting Sanji to say, that had not been on his list. Frowning as he tried to remember what the blond might be referring to, however a lot had taken place in India, and he could hardly begin to know where to start with what Sanji was referring to. Grip softening, his thumb unconsciously dragged across the blond’s knuckles softly, shaking his head as he admitted, “There was a lot said…”

Nodding slowly, Sanji seemed to agree to that point at least as he looked away as his teeth toyed with his bottom lip and Zoro took the small moment to really take in Sanji up close. Hair tied back in a sloppy, haphazard mess that looked like it hadn’t been washed for days, and the darkness forming under his eyes meant he hadn’t slept much either. The unkempt stubble from the previous week was heavier, covering his healing wounds, and making him seem inexplicably older.

“I didn’t…” Sanji began and Zoro eyes trailed the line of the man’s jaw down to where he swallowed nervously before facing Zoro again. Eyes flitting across Zoro but refusing to make eye contact as he finally seemed to settle on Zoro’s shoulder as his teeth were making a solid effort to grind themselves down, “I don’t want to be that person waiting for a call to be answered by somebody who might never pick up.”

Sanji’s words felt akin to a bucket of ice water being dumped on his head, reeling as their conversation from the wedding came back to hit him full force. Everything he had done, and all Sanji had said - had shared - to make Zoro realize he wasn’t alone in his struggle. And without even realizing it, Zoro had taken the very thing that haunted Sanji the most and made him endure it.

Jerking forward in his panic, he exclaimed in horror, “You won’t! I wo--”

Cutting himself off, Zoro shook his head vigorously as he knew those weren’t the right words to say. Not when this was just as important as every time Sanji had made the effort to be respectful of Zoro’s own trauma, and especially not when - in his haste to protect the blond - he put himself in the very position that could hurt the blond the most. It had been different back in the weeks before, when he hadn’t thought he’d meant that much to the blond, but now he knew the extent of Sanji’s feelings, and what that entailed.

“Sanji.” Zoro started over with a serious moue, leaning forward as much as the chair - and his stiff body - would allow. Dragging Sanji’s hand forward until he was able to clasp it between his good hand as well as the one confined to the sling. Squeezing tight to force Sanji to drag his gaze up from Zoro’s shoulder and look him in the eye, “I promise, I will never--”
Sanji’s stare was heavy and it caused Zoro to waver a moment.

Breaking eye contact for a moment to look down at Sanji’s hand that was still so concerningly lax within his hands, calluses and rough skin catching on Zoro’s palms. Huffing out a breath, Zoro tightened his hands nearly desperately as he looked up again, completely resolute, “I will never put you in that position again.”

The way Sanji’s blue eyes began to soften eased an ache on Zoro’s heart.

“If I’m still allowed to prove that to you?”

An impatient huff hissed through Sanji’s teeth as Zoro could practically see his patience snapping, chair skidding roughly as Sanji stood abruptly – nearly knocking it over – as he threw himself at Zoro. One hand bracing on the table, the other came up to snag Zoro’s neck and reef him forward into a desperate kiss. Eye wide for only a moment, a second later Zoro was letting it slide shut as he got his answer. Slanting his mouth over Sanji’s and finally – finally – was able to know what the other man tasted like.

Lips sliding against those chapped smoker’s lips as his tongue dipped inside to know exactly what he had been craving for so long. Groaning sharply, Zoro reacted almost instantly as his own hand came up to tangle in Sanji’s hair as he returned the kiss with panicked fervour.

It was all so painfully intoxicating. Being able to finally hold Sanji as tightly as he had always wanted, press his lips desperately against the man, and yet still frustrated that he wasn’t close enough. His entire being ached for Sanji in ways he couldn’t possibly describe and it felt like nothing would ever get him close to him as he needed. But it wouldn’t stop him from trying.

They eventually pulled apart far too long after Zoro realized what he had done, head drawing back as he slowly released Sanji. The blond’s eyes fluttering open to look at Zoro with confusion already creasing his brow but still leaning over Zoro like he was ready to dive in again.

“Sorry.” Zoro huffed out through a wide grin, knowing he should be ashamed at his lack of control, but unable to stop the elation within him from finally, properly, kissing the blond. Head still spinning, he tried to make sense of what Sanji had done, and what it all meant, and how it disrespected Sanji’s wish not to do anything so long as Zoro was still involved with Kalifa. It was all so messed up, and Zoro couldn’t help but guffaw as he ran a hand through his hair bashfully, “I shouldn’t have...”

“What--” Sanji frowned in clear bewilderment as he straightened, “What the hell are you apologizing for?”

“You said...” Zoro’s eyes slowly tracked up the length of Sanji’s body; past his sockless feet and up his jean clad legs, leading to a tapered waist where his awful patterned shirt was tucked in, up the lean torso that was completely hidden behind the unflattering shirt and to his face, where blue eyes watched him with overwhelming sincerity

“W-What’d I say?”

“Kalifa. Us.” Zoro managed out, immediately wincing at his inability to be at all tactful - and effectively ruin whatever moment they had been having before he had decided to mention his wife - as he gestured to the both of them, “That you didn’t want...”

Sanji seemed genuinely lost for several moments before his eyes lit up with understanding followed by an unnecessary roll of his eyes as he squawked, “Oh my god, that?!?”

“What?” Zoro demanded, mimicking Sanji’s incredulous tone, “That’s what you wanted!”
“I think after everything it’s easy to say that that no longer matters.” Sanji managed through a hollow laugh, smile breaking across his face as he raised a hand with a half shrug, “I mean call me old fashioned, but once your spouse tries to murder you I’m assuming it’s over?”

“Par for the course.” Zoro shrugged as he stiffly rose from his chair - having spent enough time sitting in his hospital bed the last few days - to properly face Sanji. “Everything’s taken care of, by the way.”

“Hm?” Sanji intoned at the sudden change of subject.

“Kalifa. The bounty.” Zoro alluded shortly with a vague wave. Not wanting to talk much more about the awkward subject than he had to as he clarified, “They’ll be sending us home soon. You can pretend like none of this ever happened.”

“Pretty sure I can’t.” Sanji apprehensively confided - eyes flicking to Zoro’s scar once more - giving a placating smile as he tried to laugh it off, “But even if I could; I wouldn’t. This has been the most insane two weeks of my life!”

Sanji’s jubilant behaviour not fooling Zoro for a second as he gave a soft albeit lame attempt to reassure the blond. “It’s just a scar.”

“I know, but...” Sanji paused, and Zoro already knew what the blond was going to say. It had been in the blond’s eyes from the moment he had taken off Zoro’s bandage, and had been there throughout their entire conversation, “I don’t to be the cause of another.”

“Yeah, I have a lot.” Zoro agreed with a small frown, “and none of them remind me of anything good. They’re all linked to something bad, or stupid, I did when I was younger. But this...” Zoro pointed to the wound resolutely, “this is going to remind me of when I finally turned my life around. When I realized what’s important.”

When he finally got Sanji.

But he wouldn’t tell the blond that, and he wouldn’t put Sanji in that position. However, he already knew Sanji knew all of this. From the conflicted expression on his face to his stubborn dismissal, “I won’t say I like it.”

“You don’t have to.” Zoro reassured the blond, after everything else Sanji had already done he didn’t expect anything more from the man. After how understanding the blond had become after having his life threatened, his apartment blown up, and been dragged across the world; Zoro figured he’d be spending the rest of his life making it all up to the other man.

Not to mention, the blond had taken to the entire experience and even saved Zoro’s life on occasion. If he hadn’t stubbornly followed along and gone to get Kohza, then Zoro would likely be dead in some warehouse after bleeding out. This whole fiasco may have started out with Zoro saving Sanji’s life, but the blond had more than returned the favour... perhaps before he had even realized it...

“Thank you for everything you did the other day.” Zoro muttered, stepping in closer, “If you hadn’t gotten Kohza there in time I probably would’ve bled out.”

“Of course!” Sanji scolded, “I told you I’m not letting you get rid of me that easily.”

“Right... Right...” Zoro amended with a jovial nod and a fond chuckle, hand dragging across his jaw while scratching absently. Pausing thoughtfully as he recounted all the other times in the past weeks Sanji had managed to save his skin, “I guess that makes us even, huh?”
“Hmm.” Sanji mused, actually seeming to pause to mentally tally their score despite Zoro not knowing why he’d bother and not just take the win for what it was. Rolling his eye as Sanji started shaking his head in disappointment, “Naw, not quite. I think you still have one up on me.”

“No,” Shaking his head fondly in disagreement, Zoro realized something he should have noticed months ago. The day that everything had changed, and the moment that had sent this whole damned whirlwind in motion, “we're even.”

“Really?” Sanji cocked an eyebrow, “Am I forgetting one? Cuz I’m not counting that whole wedding fiasco; I ended up getting myself out of that mess… Crazily enough. Which is something I still can’t believe I managed to pull off - I mean - I could’ve gotten my head shot off if I’d messed that up.”

A chuckle shook Zoro’s shoulders at Sanji’s ramblings, before shaking his head to dismiss the blond’s confusion. Thinking back to that mild spring day when his eyes had first landed on the blond; in his work scrubs, juggling several coffees, and grinning at him. Finally responding, “When you gave me your coffee.”

“Pfht.” Sanji’s scoff seemed to almost take himself by surprise, before breaking out into a snicker with a ludicrous roll of his eyes, “How does that possibly count?”

“Meeting you saved my life.”

For what felt like the first time, Sanji was left speechless. No witty remark, or snide comeback. No teasing mockery, or nervously laughed off jibe. Just wide eyed stunned silence as he looked at Zoro nearly distraught as Zoro found another urge welling within him that he couldn't find the ability to stop in time.

“Sanji, I--” Zoro faltered as abruptly as he started, the words he had been dying to say for weeks now dying in his throat as he had no idea how to bring himself to say it. The words that he had repeated so many times to Kalifa in hollow repetition just didn't feel like they did justice to what he felt for Sanji. This overwhelming, consuming emotion that he had been drowning in for months now that he had never before experienced from another person.

How was he possibly supposed to express it?!

“I know.” Sanji murmured softly, the achingly sincere words drawing Zoro out of his self-depricating spiral of panic as he glanced up at the blond in surprise. Eyes wide, he met Sanji's own soothing soft blue, a breathtaking smile reaching his lips as he continued, “You don't have to say it.”

Zoro was at a loss, completely unable to fathom how Sanji could possibly know what Zoro was dying to say. However, it shouldn't have been a surprise since Sanji had been able to read him far better and for much longer than he had ever thought possible. Muttering with not nearly as much disbelief as was warranted, “How?”

“You took a bullet for me.” Sanji stressed the word, as though that alone was more than a perfect explanation before continuing with a puzzled expression on his face, “Multiple actually; how else am I supposed to interpret that?”

“Total accident.” Zoro declined childishly, a grin splitting his face, “Wrong place, wrong time.”

“You’re telling me you got lost?”

“Ye-- No!” Zoro’s smile fell from his face in record time as he narrowed his eyes at the snickering blond. It seemed Sanji had recovered his aplomb and was back to his normal teasing self, Zoro
grimacing as he attempted half-heartedly, “Bad timing?”

“Everything about us seems like bad timing.” Sanji chuckled, his eyes falling to the gold band still prominently on Zoro’s finger. Yet, despite how playful his tone was, Zoro could hear the resounding pain underneath it.

Reaching up and wrestling the ring off his finger, Zoro turned towards the open bay windows and hucked it without a second thought. Turning back to the blond who actually seemed rather surprised by the gesture as Zoro just levelled him with a resolute stare.

This time Zoro got the opportunity to properly lean in and kiss Sanji the way he had always pictured in his head; to make up for the way he had the other day. Hand slipping up to tangle in soft curls, cradle the back of the blond’s head and pull him in for a slow, lax kiss. Able to really relax into it in a way he wanted to from the first moment all those weeks ago when he had first realized his want to kiss the blond.

Zoro’s chest was pinched for an entirely different reason as the tenderness and gentle motions of the kiss were cutting off his capacity to breathe. Far more intent on just continuing to taste the lips sliding against his than to take a moment to remember to inhale through his nose; it was as though he was a teenager again and was kissing someone for the first time and had forgotten he could still function even with someone attached to his lips.

With a final, chaste kiss Sanji pulled away, “Just so we're clear; I feel the same way... You can drag me across the world anytime...”

“Kicking and screaming?”

Sanji conceded with a fond smile, leaning up to capture Zoro's lips in another kiss while murmuring against them softly, “Would you have it any other way?”

“Probably not.”

“Good.”

~X~

“Stop picking at it.” The blond’s hand shot out to try and bat away Zoro’s from where it was currently scratching at the laceration on his face that was hidden by layers of bandages. His scolding sounding akin to how one would chastise a child.

“It’s itchy.” Zoro groused, hand dropping from his cheek to his shoulder where he began rubbing at the bandage concealing the bullet wound; rubbing vigorously at the fabric in an attempt to relieve some of the irritation. With no more distractions or death threats, he was now at the point of healing where all he had to do now was take drugs to mask the pain, and deal with the mind numbing sensation of his wounds itching until they fully healed.

It was the worst...

Shaking his head, Sanji chided, “Don’t make me hold your hand.”

Almost.

“Is that a threat?” Glancing out of his good eye at the man walking in step with him and was conveniently always on his right side - if the blond thought Zoro hadn’t noticed then he was sorely mistaken. A teasing grin lighting up Zoro’s face as he watched the blond physically wrestle down a
smile of his own.

“...yes.” He grunted back childishly.

Zoro lifted his one good shoulder in a half shrug. “Doesn’t sound so bad.”

“I can make it bad if you want?” Sanji offered with a sincerity that was borderline mockery, eyes wide and smile beaming. And despite the empty threat, Zoro couldn’t help but love that everything felt like it was back to normal. Back to them teasing each other, expect this time if he wanted to lean in and kiss the blond, well, there was nothing that could stop him.

Pushing down the urge for now, Zoro rolled his one good eye with a drawl, “How could you possibly make it bad?”

“Man, you really - obviously - never had brothers.” Sanji shook his head almost wistfully, “Ever had a hug turn into a suplex? Cause I have.”

“Can’t say that I have.”

“Well, you’re not missing out.”

Staying just a few steps behind the agent that had been guiding them across the tarmac of the airport, their playful bickering trailed off as they neared the small jet that’d be taking them home. A couple of familiar faces waiting for them by the stairs had Sanji dropping their conversation about brotherly antics and darting ahead to greet them with Zoro following behind at a much more leisurely pace.

As drugged up as he was, he was in no mood to move faster than he had to anymore, arriving at Sanji’s side long after he had already fawned over Stussy. The woman in question was looking practically flawless except for the way she favoured her side where her injury was still fresh. He was just glad to see he was up and about considering the state he had left her in. Remarking, “You look good.”

A sardonic look twisted her face as she intoned, “You look like shit.”

Zoro barked a laugh. “I’ve been better.”

“You got some dumb luck working for you,” Kohza smirked, with a disbelieving shake of his head. Glancing about in regards to not only their current situation, but their entire ridiculous adventure. “Everything working out like this.”

Chuckling, Zoro agreed with a nod, “Wouldn’t have if not for you two.”

“Still not going to thank me?” Stussy butted in with a teasing smirk.

“I’ll send a card.”

Stussy gave an amused snort before dismissing him as she strode over to Sanji with outspread arms. Pulling him down into a hug as she crooned, “Give us a hug, darling. And don’t let that stupid lug get you into any more life threatening disasters that I have to personally pull you out of.”

Sanji’s eyes flickered to Zoro as he murmured around a grin, “I’ll try.”

Shaking his head at her behaviour, Zoro turned back to Kohza and extended his good which Kohza ignored in favour of pulling him into a one armed hug. Patting him firmly on the back before pulling away to clamp his hand down on Kohza’s shoulder with a squeeze, “Thanks for having us. And
“I look forward to it.”

A soft cough had Zoro glancing over to the agent that had escorted them to the airport and was seeing them off. Leaving Sanji with the couple, he made his way over to where the agent stood, came to a stop in front of the man and waited silently for him to speak.

“I hope this will be the last time we see each other.” The agent grunted with an extended hand, “And I mean that with most utter sincerity.”

Taking the man’s hand, he gave a firm shake as he nodded, “Feeling’s mutual.”

“One final thing, Roronoa.” The agent muttered, “I’ve been tasked to inform you that the department thanks you for assistance - despite your methods,” He continued, “And if there is ever anything we can do for you?”

Zoro shook his head softly, gaze turning towards the blond man currently waving his hands about eccentrically as he babbled happily to Stussy and Kohza. Face alight and healthy - no more bags under his eyes, or weary lines in his cheeks - after having finally gotten what was no doubt the first stress free sleep he had gotten in weeks the other night.

Every bit the bubbly blond he remembered from before all of this had happened. As Zoro watching the smiling man, he knew he wanted nothing more than to go back to his old life – the life in Merryville – except this time start over with Sanji.

Settle down. Live a simple life. In a quiet town...

Everything Zoro was supposed to have done three years ago he could now do right; get a house together, get married, maybe adopt a few dogs... A thought slowly occurred to him as he turned back to the other agent who regarded him in interest, raising a brow behind his sunglasses. Soft smile reaching Zoro's lips as he murmured, “Actually...”

TBC...
A Simple Life

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
One Year Later...

Sun flitted through the drapes that shuddered lazily in the summer breeze humming through the open window and bathing the two sleeping men in a warm glow. Zoro blearily blinking awake as his schedule now had him sleeping in long after the sun had risen and even longer still on the days Sanji happened to work a night shift and came to bed at ridiculous hours. Giving a heavy groan, he rolled over to find Sanji curled into his pillow with a blissful expression on his face, and a dumb smile worked its way onto Zoro's.

It had been almost a year, and yet he still wasn't tired by the sight of Sanji every morning when he awoke. Wavy hair a haphazard mess that fell into his face and took on a magnificent golden glow when the morning light came in through the window to filter through the tresses. Unable to stop his hand from reaching out and carding through the locks in adoration and brush them back from the man's face; exposing his handsome features and the stubble that had come in overnight to decorate his jaw.

Sanji stirred lightly, and Zoro leaned in to press a kiss to the blond's still slack lips, pulling away to watch as the sleep dazed man only just recognized the sensation and tilted his jaw up to return the kiss that had already ended. Giving a soft chuckle, Zoro leaned back in to press a chaste kiss to Sanji's forehead and murmured, “Just going for a run.”

“'ll c'me; g'Ve me tw' min's.” Sanji mumbled out in a daze, body not moving in the slightest as it was clear the blond was mostly speaking on instinct.

“Sleep.” Zoro ordered with a laugh, “Idiot.”

“Sh't uhP.” Sanji grumbled as he turned his face into his pillow, passing out before he even finished his response. Sun bathed his back as a soft snore could already be heard from the exhausted man. Lately, Sanji's schedule had been pretty regular, but every once in a while he worked a night shift or a double and would end up sleeping late into the afternoon to recover properly.

Giving a final kiss to the mess of blond hair, Zoro pushed himself out of bed and walked directly past the alarm clock that he didn't even bother looking at. Snatching a pair of shorts out of his closet, he headed to the gym they had set up in a spare room down stairs, casually going through his workout routine as late morning sun shone in through the window and illuminated the room.

Finishing up rather quickly before heading to the kitchen and chugging back several glasses of water before digging through the cupboards under the sink to pull out the dog food. Filling up a bowl by the fridge, and topping up the water dish, he gave a soft whistle through his teeth and called, “Wado.”
Soft padding of paws on the hardwood announced the arrival of the older dog as she rounded the corner and came trotting over with a happy smile and exuberant tail wag. Stopping and falling onto her haunches as Zoro dropped down to give her some affectionate pats, “Good morning, girl.”

She gave a content grumble before turning away and making for her dish, digging in as Zoro pushed himself to his feet and went back to the other two dishes. Filling them up and balancing them on his arm as he kicked the cupboard closed and asked absently, “Boys still outside, huh?”

Making his way past Wado, he made for the back door where they had installed a flap so the dogs could come and go as they pleased. Shoving open the back door, Zoro stepped out onto the modest porch and into the warm sunlight of the summer morning. Yuba and Kitetsu both looked up in interest upon his arrival; Yuba sprawled in a patch of sunlight enjoying the summer heat and Kitetsu curled up in his dog house. Kitetsu was still a rather reclusive animal, but he had grown fond of the other two rather quickly, much to Zoro's relief.

“Breakfast.” Zoro grunted with a grin. Setting the down the dishes and leaving both of them to it, knowing that neither of them would come running, and would mostly eat whenever they felt ready. Checking the outside water dish was still full before heading back inside where Wado was just finishing up and now looking up at him expectantly, “Yeah. Yeah. Time for a run.”

Finding his running shoes, he laced them up easily – it had been months since he had had to pay attention to each motion to keep himself grounded. Finishing the last knot with a quick jerk, he nabbed the leash from the hook by the door and stepped out the front door with Wado trotting happily at his side.

~X~

Gravel crunched loudly under the tires of the large truck, engine cutting out as both men got out and stepped into the gorgeous summer weather that had come around once more. Sanji made his way to the driver's side as Zoro opened up the back door to the quad cab, barely getting it unlatched before three dogs came bolting out. Wado already in the lead as she took off towards the open field with Kitetsu close on her heels; Yuba making his way lazily behind them.

Leaving the dogs to their fun, they headed up the gorgeous walkway that lead to the quaint facility that was nestled amongst the forest bordering the large field. A chorus of excited howls and yips could be heard from the kennels behind the building as the residents became aware of the new arrivals. Making for the door as they passed by the large sign that read with bold warm lines of script nestled on a bed of clouds;

Skypiea
Animal Shelter
and Kennels

Stepping inside the building, they found the manager of the place just coming in from the back room to welcome them before realizing who they were. A bright smile lit up her face as she pulled off her work gloves and set them aside as she strode forward eagerly.

“Oh, Zoro!” Conis chirped happily, “Sanji! It's so great to see you!”

Zoro awkwardly accepted the hug from her before she turned to Sanji who made a show of picking her up and giving her a squeeze and a spin before putting her down. Tittering happily as she found her footing once more, Conis tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear as she glanced between the two, “What brings you here today?”
“Had the afternoon off,” Sanji explained cheerfully, “Figured we'd stop by and give the dogs some time to stretch their legs.”

“Well you know I always love when you visit.” Conis gushed, “If you want to go to the field, I can meet you there in a moment with a few other rescues I'm sure would love your attention?”

“Sounds great.”

Making their way back around to the large field, they unlatched the gate to the fence and Zoro held it open as he waited for all three of their dogs to make their way inside. Half the field had been left open since it made a nice area for people to bring their own dogs, and the other half had been fenced to let the rescues roam freely for long periods of time without having to worry about wolves attacking them, or wandering too far away and not being able to locate them. They also got more than enough space so there were no longer crowding issues, hence why the dogs were all typically in much better spirits.

“So how much you wanna bet Luffy ruins the cake before the ceremony?” Sanji chuckled as he fell into step behind Yuba, dropping to a knee to attend to the old hound, lovingly scratching him behind the ears as he cast a glance back at Zoro.

Zoro finished latching the gate as their other two dogs began roaming about, inspecting the field despite having been there multiple times before. Wado got bored rather quick and had taken her favourite place on Zoro's right side, Zoro dropping a hand to scratch behind her ears as he replied absently, “Nami would throttle him.”

“Oh, that she would.” Sanji swooned with a happy sigh, “And she'd still look like a goddess while doing it; I can't wait to see her in her dress. It's gonna be like witnessing an angel.”

A scoff bodily shook Zoro as he eyed the blond, giving Wado a final pat as he shoved his hands into his pockets, “Sure you shouldn't be the one marrying her?”

“Pah,” Sanji pouted, dismissing Zoro's comment with a wave as he pushed himself back to his feet. Responding wistfully, “She'd never have me.”

“Glad to know I was your first choice.” Zoro drawled, rolling his eye rather dramatically. Taking a step closer towards the man as he was already thinking of several ways to playfully rile the man up, crook of his finger placed under Sanji's jaw as he guided the man's gaze up to look at him.

“Yeah...” Sanji shrugged, purposefully – teasingly – not looking Zoro in the eye as his gaze instead flickered over Zoro's shoulder, “You're okay I guess.”

Letting go of the blond's chin, he wrapped his arms around Sanji in a modest hug and glanced at the blond with a wicked smirk, “I love you too, Curly.”

A look of horrified recognition crossed the blond's face a second before Zoro was dragging him down into the grass using all his weight. The blond put up a decent fight despite Zoro's surprise attack, nearly getting away before Zoro managed to finally hold him down, pinning his wrists to the ground before glancing up at Wado who had watched the whole scuffle while yipping and scurrying around them excitedly; more than used to their behaviour. Giving a sharp whistle, he gestured his head down toward Sanji and muttered, “Get 'im.”

“No.” Sanji yelped, struggling viciously in Zoro's grasp as Wado ducked into to lick at Sanji's face. Sanji’s writhing and squirming got worse than before as he desperately tried to free himself all while barking in a rather shrill voice through his forced laughter, “No! Gods damn it, you're the worst,
mosshead! Wado! Down girl! Stop! Please!"

Excited yipping announced Conis' arrival as Zoro released the blond and pushed himself to his feet to stay out of Sanji's wrath. Watching as Conis brought out four other rescues that immediately took to the field excitedly and greet their own dogs happily; having become regular playmates.

Glancing down at Sanji, who had finally managed to sit up – hair a slobberly mess and his clean shirt covered in grass stains – while giving a disgusted, “Yuck.”

“Y'know Curly...” Zoro snickered as he watched Sanji unsteadily push himself to his feet, “Imitation is flattery, but I didn't know you liked me that much...”

Glancing down at his shirt that was now more green than white before back up at Zoro with a narrowed glare. Sanji wiped some of the slobber from his cheek with the back of his hand as he threatened playfully, “You're gonna pay for that one.”

“Nope!” Conis ordered happily as she stalked over, placing a large bucket of tennis balls in Sanji's hands to keep them occupied and unable to lash out at Zoro, “No more rough housing. It riles them up.”

Sanji was clearly torn between making Zoro eat grass and pleasing the word of the pretty woman, but eventually gave in with a swoon and smile as he made his way out to the field. Placing the bucket down and tying his hair back into a messy bun, snatching a tennis ball from the bucket before rearing back and whipping the ball into the field as hard as he could.

From a comfortable place leaning against the fence, Zoro watched Sanji from afar as the blond continued to play with the dogs. Conis standing by his side just as silent as several dogs took off immediately as the blond snatched up another ball to toss for them. Some of the dogs returned the ball to Sanji which he immediately threw again, while others got a hold of one and darted off to protect their prize. All of them played well together and it was clear that Conis had spent a great deal of time getting a lot of them accustomed to one another.

Out of the corner of his eye, Zoro noted as Conis raised her hand to have it come to rest upon her chest as she murmured, “Zoro... I just can't thank you enough for this...”

Turning back to the field, he gave an awkward shrug as he muttered, “It's not a big deal...”

“Yes! It is!” Conis implored, turning away from Sanji to bodily face Zoro, “I don't know how you did it but...”

Zoro let her words trail off without a response. She had pestered him about it for several months after he had managed to get the funding for the building and the large acreage for her, but he had firmly denied an explanation. It hadn't stopped her from thanking him every time they visited, but she had at least accepted she'd never get the full story out of him.

“It's good seeing you so happy.” Conis murmured finally.

Zoro conceded a snort at that, giving a playful jerk of his thumb towards Sanji, “It's hard to be glum around that one.”

“It's not just that,” Conis shook her head softly, “You're a different person than when I first met you; more at peace.”

The sardonic grin on his face fell into something much softer at the truth in her words, knowing without a doubt that he was an entirely different man than when he had first walked into her shelter
all those years ago. But in truth, that was why he felt indebted to her; when he had felt useless she had given him somewhere with a purpose. No questions asked, no words said; just there for him.

Like so many people were now...

Giving a short nod as he agreed, “I am.”

Nothing else needed to be said - which was what he had appreciated so much about her from the beginning – as she simply placed a hand to his arm and gave a reassuring squeeze. A sweet smile lighting up her face before walking away and making for the field where Sanji was occupying several of the rescues.

Zoro watched as she came to stand beside Sanji and lean in, able to easily discern as she mouthed 'Thank you.' to the man who just quirked a brow in confusion. Head whipping around to where Zoro was still leaning against the fence watching the two fondly; giving Sanji a reassuring smile and wave to ward off his confusion until the man eventually grinned back with that perfect smile Zoro had fallen in love with.

~X~

Dipping the razor into the sink, Zoro swished it about to get rid of any excess hair before bringing it up to continue dragging across his face. Getting the last of the stray hairs at his jaw before dropping the razor into the water and snatching up a towel to wipe off the excess soap and water. Dabbing down his chest, he tilted his head from side to side to inspect his work just as Sanji appeared in the bathroom.

Hands looped around his waist from behind, clasping gently around him as Sanji's cheek nuzzled against his back with a happy hum of contentment. Even the barest contact causing Zoro's heart to skip a beat; just like their very first time... and every time since.

Placing the towel down, he began draining the sink and wiping off the counter as he asked, “Need something?”

“Oh, definitely.” Sanji hummed, pressing fully up against Zoro and making his 'something' clearly known, “A lot of things.”

Tossing the dirty towel aside, he looked up to meet Sanji's gaze in the mirror and countered with a grin, “I already showered.”

“I haven't~” Sanji rebuked with a smirk.

Zoro contemplated the offer for all of a second before turning around and scooping the man up into his arms with a greedy kiss. Dragging him out of the bathroom and over to the bed where he unceremoniously dropped the man – only because he loved the disgruntled look it earned him – before tackling him a moment later. Sprawled in the mess of unmade blankets, he kissed Sanji happily in the patch of afternoon sun that lit up his fair skin.

If Sanji wanted to risk them being late, then who was Zoro to deny him. Hands skimmed down warm flesh and lean body as Zoro's mouth wandered down to a collarbone he teased with eager teeth. Taking in all of the blond's body that his senses could, his need to be close to the other man hadn't diminished a bit since their first time. If anything, only getting worse as he had finally found a new crutch; and one that was significantly less bad for him.

It wasn't long before Sanji was flipping them over and he was taking his own turn to trail reverent kisses down Zoro's body in a weird pre-sex ritual he never failed to do when he was feeling mushy.
Which was a lot of the time, but had yet to bother Zoro.

Kalifa had never cared about any of his scars, yet Sanji revered each one with painful cautiousness. Sanji knew the story behind each mark and every bullet wound, he spent hours worshipping each scar and kissing each blemish as though thanking it for having not taken Zoro's life. Instead of waking up in the morning and seeing a broken and cracked image of a man that had given up on life, Zoro now saw marks that had brought him to where he was today; to Sanji. And each one now linked to a different memory.

Each wound no longer carried the dark memories of its creation but rather the reverent kisses of the man he loved. A bullet wound to his arm wasn't an unpleasant reminder of his past life, but the constant memory of laying in bed on a snowed in morning as he told Sanji what had happened. And the large scar on his leg no longer had him breaking out in a sweat at the thought of the nightmares it caused, but had him thinking of a moonlit lake in the heat of midnight summer when Sanji had asked about the story.

The stories that had haunted him and that he had desperately tried to forget had now become something much stronger. And instead of trying to forget in an attempt to heal, he had found an entirely new way to embrace what had happened to him and what made him be. He wasn’t perfect, but he'd learned to accept that. And more importantly, be at peace that he never would be.

Like almost every time, Sanji's head dipped forward and his lips sought out the wound to Zoro's shoulder that Sanji seemed to thank every day for not taking Zoro’s life. Kisses almost always trailed up from there to his neck, and then teeth would nibble at his jaw before pulling back to level a look on Zoro.

Hand coming up to brush Zoro's erratic hair back so Sanji was able to see every bit of the scar that sat the length of his face; from the thin end that sat below his cheek bone, all the way up to the jagged tip that ran into his hairline. Urging Zoro forward just enough that he could lean in to press a kiss to the permanently shut eye before pulling back to stare into Zoro's remaining eye with unwavering love.

Desire mounting, Zoro reefed the blond back down into an intoxicating kiss as they became lost in a tangle of blankets and overwhelming emotion. Sanji’s gentle actions always stirring up an arousal in Zoro that he had trouble controlling, pinning the blond back into the sheets as he began prepping him. Lube slick fingers working into him as a glorious flush decorated Sanji’s chest and face; slack jawed ecstasy replacing the blond’s earlier look of fondness.

It wasn’t long before hazy blue eyes were opening and Sanji was forcing Zoro to quit teasing him already. A moment later sliding into Sanji as Zoro began moving in deep, languid thrusts as everything became awash of vibrant sensation and tantalizing movements. Hands grasping slick sheets in desperation, lips sliding across heated flesh drenched in sweat, toes curling in pleasure as they pulled each other closer.

Propping a hand on the headboard, his other trailed up Sanji’s thigh - both of which were clasped eagerly around Zoro’s waist - as Zoro took a commanding grip and hiked the blond higher. Angling to just the right spot that he knew drove the blond wild as he let his eye fall shut and simply soaked up the sensation of being inside the man and hearing his guttural moans.

Sighs coming from perfect lips that he already missed, ducking back down meet the blond’s feverish kisses as his hand fell between them to grasp Sanji’s length. Stroking him in time to his thrusts as he could already tell from the way the blond’s legs were twitching that he was trying to stave off his climax. Practically whimpering into Zoro’s mouth as he came with a back arching shudder and groan that had Zoro tripping over his own as well.
“Sanji...” Zoro choked out, stilling against the man as he hit his peak. Waves of pleasure knocking the wind out of him until he managed to get enough of a grasp on himself to keep moving as he milked them both. Stars dancing behind his eyelid as he found himself slumping into the blond a little bit more with each finishing thrust.

“I know.” Sanji urged breathlessly, arching his head back to slide his lips along Zoro's jaw before eventually finding his lips and matching Zoro in a desperate kiss. Sucking and biting as the repeated words were a mumbled smear against Zoro’s jaw, “I know.”

A heavy groan slipped out of Zoro as he leaned further into the blond still propped up as all his motivation to leave the house had left him conveniently at the same time he had climaxed. Now all he wanted to do was drag the covers over the both of them and hopefully sleep the midsummer afternoon away in the sunlit patch that warmed the bed. Not even so inclined to roll off the man, as he instead slumped into the blond’s ready embrace and shoved his face into the man’s collarbone to ward off reality.

It seemed to last for a few minutes; Sanji’s hands threading through Zoro’s hair methodically, Zoro drifting off to the melodic rise and fall of the blond’s chest, before Sanji deigned to be the more rational one. Hands stopping short as one patted Zoro’s head as he commented in bemusement, “Okay, now we really need to go...”

“You started this.” Zoro groused the words petulantly into Sanji’s collarbone.

“And I think we both ended it...” Sanji chuckled fondly, “Quite spectacularly, I might add.”

Zoro finally lifted his head to grunt at the blond, “Dork.”

“Moss.” Sanji countered, giving Zoro a final kiss before pushing himself out of bed with a stretch and a far too pleased hum of approval. Rolling over so he could get a better view, Zoro watched the blond leave with a hunger already growing in the pit of his stomach again as he watched the man’s naked figure walking away from him.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Zoro resisted the urge to race after him and instead slowly rose to his feet to finish getting ready. Cleaning up the bit of mess they had made before throwing on his dress shirt and methodically doing up the buttons as he listened to the running water as Sanji showered. Smiling to himself as he could hardly believe this was the norm for him now, living together with the man and experiencing these casual mundane moments with him.

It was still a rather new house, but they had very quickly made it a home. When they had returned to Merryville a year ago - with Sanji having a burnt shell of an apartment and Zoro with a house that was only filled with bad memories - it hadn't take much time before they had decided to get their own place together. It had been a little strange at first, but they fell into a rhythm surprisingly fast.

With everything shifting back to reality so quickly – and the threat of death no longer hanging over them – it had left them in a completely new situation. However, in a span of a few days everything had fallen into place as though it had always meant to be that way, and Zoro had found himself waking up each day just as thrilled as the day before.

By the time Zoro had finished adjusting his tie, Sanji had exited the shower and was already in the process of getting dressed as Zoro went in search of his patch. Digging through several drawers before eventually finding it at the bottom of his sock drawer and making his way out to the hallway mirror to make sure he at least put it on correctly this time.

Fitting the odd patch over his head, he adjusted his hair enough that the strap didn't make it sit too flat
before glancing at his reflection momentarily. Always feeling a little weird with the patch, but also
finding it polite when going to important occasions or places with a lot of people; it helped with the
staring. While the scar wasn’t too nasty, it was still a rather shocking sight to some people, and it was
just easier for him to cover it.

“You know...” Sanji interrupted Zoro's thoughts as he made his way down the hall with a smirk, “I
think the last time I saw you in a suit you got shot.”

Forcefully lowering his hands so they wouldn't muss with the strap anymore, he turned towards Sanji
and chuckled, “Let's hope this time ends better.”

“I think I can easily promise it will. Unless there’s any more women who want you dead that I
haven’t met yet?” Sanji assured, correcting the patch a touch before letting his hand fall to cradle
Zoro's jaw. Adding with utter sincerity, “It doesn't look that bad.”

“I feel like a pirate.” Zoro deadpanned.

“Just another reason for Luffy to adore you.” Sanji smiled before leaning to give him a soft kiss,
Zoro returning it just as sweetly, knowing anything more would likely cause them to be late. Sanji
eventually pulled back and shrugged, “If you hate it so much, don't wear it.”

“Nah.” Zoro batted Sanji's hands away, as the whole issue suddenly seemed so very trivial after a
kiss from the blond. Somehow Sanji had a remarkable way of making Zoro's worries vanish. “It's
fine. Less stares.”

“If you're sure...”

“I am.” Zoro grinned, snatching Sanji's wrist and pulling him into a final – tad too heated kiss –
before tugging the still dazed blond along towards the stairs. “Let's go.”

“A-alright.” Sanji agreed rather dopily, confused smile on his face as he let Zoro tug him along.

Making their way downstairs and out of their house, they passed by the mantle in the living room
which housed an assortment of clutter and collected knickknacks over the past months. A bowling
trophy, ticket stubs to a soccer game for Sanji's favourite team, a cast covered in familiar signatures,
and right in the centre was the bottled ship Zoro had given Sanji all those months ago; feeling like a
lifetime away.

~X~

Arriving at Nami's family home, they found the entire place lit up with tasteful fairy lights and
flowers woven along all the balconies and railings. Large signs directed guests along a footpath that
lead around to the massive orchard that was in the backyard, and as they rounded the house, the
walkway lead them directly into the tangerine grove.

As they made their way down one of the many rows of tangerines, they found the bushes alight with
fairy lights causing the leaves and fruits to glow brilliant oranges and greens. But what really set the
experience apart were the dozens of photos hanging from the bushes of the couple. All of the times
they had spent together. Some of them as kids, others of them with their families, or with their
friends, and dozens of just them together. Sharing kisses, laughing together, smiling brightly.

Upon reaching the end of the grove they found a large chalkboard sat propped by the entry to the
garden with beautiful calligraphy writing out in curling letters;

Nami Mikan and Vivi Nefertari
Out of the grove, they found the rest of the backyard had been transformed as well. Between the tangerine grove and the apple orchard, there was a large field where everything had been set up; a dining area sat off to the side near the large oaks bordering their property, a bar was situated near the small decorative pond, and in the remaining part of the field chairs were set up facing a large archway made of tangerine saplings.

There was already a large amount of people milling about and waiting for the ceremony to start; friends and family members of both brides. Everyone looking jubilant and excited to be there as it seemed that everyone else integral to the ceremony were likely in the house getting ready and finishing final touches.

“Sanji! Zoro!”

“Luffy!” Zoro called out, half in surprise as the young man came sprinting towards them. A grin already growing on his face as Sanji murmured a soft, “Oh no.”

A second later they were both nearly knocked over as Luffy literally threw himself onto them before enclosing them in a rib crushing hug. Zoro chuckled fondly and ruffled the man's hair back as Sanji - both arms trapped - just accepted his fate with a wheezed grumble, “My back.”

Finally releasing them, Sanji took a few moments to straighten out his suit as Zoro got a good look at the other man whom Nami had managed to shove into a suit for the occasion. It was probably one of the few times he had ever seen the man wearing pants instead of shorts, and it looked like he had actually run a comb through his unruly hair for once. “You ready?”

“Yup!” Luffy grinned, digging in his pocket to pull out a wad of index cards, “Nami made these for me so I won't forget.”


“Always a great planner, that Nami.” Sanji swooned.

“Luffy!” Chopper poked his head out of the house, “Get in here! We need to get ready!”

“Be right there!”

“I still can’t believe Nami’s letting him officiate.” Sanji muttered in awe as they both watched Luffy sprint across the yard while shoving his index cards back into his pocket, startling several guests and nearly knocking drinks out of more than a couple guests hands as he made for the back door where Chopper had beckoned him from. Turning back to Zoro, Sanji shook his head, “Or how on earth he got his license.”

“I thought it was because--”

“UNCLE ZORO!” Was screamed out by a chorus of children barrelling towards them that had just emerged from the tangerine grove, Sanji actually taking a step away from Zoro to stay out of harms way. Zoro had just enough time to grace the blond with a look of betrayal before he had three children colliding into him.

“Can I wear your eye patch?”

“Can I have a shoulder ride?”

Two of the three had taken to their ritualistic harassment of climbing onto his back and dangling from his neck, while Tama was dangling from Zoro's arm and needling him, “You promised you show me
some more cool arm locks!”

It went on for several minutes as Zoro answered their questions while uselessly attempting to remove the clingy children from himself. Several adults looked on with small smiles and light laughter at the adorable scene taking place. Sanji seemed to finally take pity on Zoro and stepped in to help peel Piiman off of Zoro's back and place him on the ground.

“Go pester Franky!” Sanji ushered them away, “I heard from your father he's supplying the fireworks for later.”

All three boys paused to turn to Sanji as a look of pure glee lit up their faces before they took off screaming to find the other man. “I wanna light them!”

“I get to first!”

“UNCE FRANKY, LET ME PLEASE!”

With the three menaces distracted, Sanji stepped forward to help straighten out Zoro's shirt and jacket that had gotten remarkably dishevelled by the hellions. Once finished with his collar, Sanji moved on to correcting Zoro's tie as he simply let the man fuss over him. Through his chuckles, Zoro sent Sanji a disapproving glare, “You're horrible.”

Sanji released Zoro's tie and waved him off, “He'll be fine.”

A few moments later Usopp came stumbling out of the grove – not particularly in a rush, but also surveying the area as though expecting to see something on fire – eyes catching sight of Zoro and Sanji and making his way over. Gaze still wandering the crowd as it was apparent he was watching to make sure his boys weren't causing any trouble.

“Ah, Usopp.” Sanji chirped, “Just saw your boys; they've gone to bother Franky if you're trying to catch them.”

“Listen,” Usopp grunted with a firm wave of his hand, “I got them dressed; that's a war all on its own. It takes a community to raise a child; time for the community to do its part.”

“Has the great Usopp been defeated by three children?” Sanji taunted, “I didn't think I'd see the day...”

“It took thirty minutes to get their ties on – THIRTY MINUTES,” Usopp repeated with near hysterical emphasis, “They each had to do it themselves; and then there's the untying and the retying and the changing of the colours and--”

“Alrighty.” Sanji cut the man off with a consoling hand around his shoulders, beginning to lead him off as he offered, “Let's go get ready for the ceremony, yeah? I'm sure Franky'll be fine with the boys.” Making sure Usopp was at least momentarily consoled before casting a glance back at Zoro, “You gonna be alright, mosshead?”

Waving the two off with a flick of his hand, Zoro scoffed, “I'll be fine.”

“Don't get lost on your way to the seats.”

As Sanji lead Usopp way with a grin and a teasing wink, Zoro flipped him off just in time for Kaya to step out of the grove and see Zoro's rude gesture. Eyes widening, he turned it into an awkward wave as she made her way over with a humorous, yet skeptical expression, “I certainly hope that wasn't for me?”
“Naw.” Zoro dismissed as he awkwardly shoved his hands into his pocket in embarrassment, refraining from ducking his head as he felt akin to a child about to be scolded. Attempting to salvage it by muttering, “Low flying duck.”

Confusion was rife on Kaya’s face as she glanced back and to the sky as though looking for a bird. “Wh--”

“It's gone.” Zoro attempted to hopelessly recover the whole situation by gesturing vaguely towards the tangerine grove, “What'd you think of the entrance?”

“Oh, the grove was so beautiful – all those photos! What a lovely idea!” Hand on her chest as she gushed while Zoro just nodded along in agreement as their previous incident was thankfully forgotten. Allowing her to swoon for a moment before glancing around intently, “Have you seen Usopp and the boys?”

“They were here a second ago,” Zoro reassured, “Sent them to Franky. Usopp and Sanji went inside since the ceremony’s about to start.”

“Ah. I see.” Kaya pressed. “Were the boy's respectful?”

“They only asked to borrow my eyepatch once.” Zoro informed with a grin.

“That's improvement I suppose.” Kaya sighed with a shake of her head, doing nothing to hide her fond grin.

“Everyone!” Nojiko announced loudly across the garden, waiting until the guests had turned their attention on her before she continued. Giving a gracious wave to the large area of the garden that had been sectioned off with an alter and rows of chairs, “We'll be beginning the ceremony in a few minutes if everyone would like to start taking their seats. Thank you!”

“I'm gonna see if I can reign in my children,” Kaya chuckled, “Can we catch up later?”

“Absolutely.” Zoro reassured her, Kaya made her way off to locate her sons as Zoro simply started following the rest of the crowd. Taking a free seat in one of the middle rows near the isle so he wouldn't get in anyone's way and waited quietly for everything to begin. After everyone was seated and Luffy had come out to take his place at the alter, a silence fell over everyone as the ceremony began.

A beautiful melody started up as everyone turned in their seats to look down the long flower-lined pathway that curved out of the seats and beyond the house. Bridal parties making their way down the aisle before taking their places at the altar on their appropriate side, Sanji making his way down with a woman Zoro vaguely recognized as one of their co-workers before letting go of her arm to allow her to stand on Nami's side as he went to Vivi's. Usopp followed closely after and took Nami's side. They were followed closely by the flower girls and the boys bearing the rings. When everyone was in place, the music paused and everyone rose to their feet.

There was a muted moment of silence before the music swelled into something brighter and everyone broke out into gasps as Nami stepped into view and began making her way down the aisle. Looking absolutely stunning, her hair done up in an elegant style with little white flowers sprinkled throughout, and the dazzling white dress – simple yet classy – was breathtaking to behold.

Gen made his way down the aisle with Nami on his arm, tears already shimmering happily in his eyes and a pinwheel fluttering in the wind sticking out of his breast pocket. Formal jacket fitted well, but still wearing a pair of white cargo shorts to counteract the summer heat. Getting to the altar, he let
her go, but not before taking her hands and kissing them lovingly a few times before muttering something that the rest of the audience couldn't make out.

It was apparent Nami was barely keeping herself from crying as well, finally letting go of his hands with a tearful laugh, letting him go take his seat as she attempted to delicately corrected her makeup before turning her attention down the aisle as she awaited Vivi.

A moment later, she stepped out on her father's arm and just like with Nami everyone gasped and even more people started tearing up. Zoro's gaze flickering from where everyone was looking at Vivi to look Nami and the look of pure exhilaration on her face caused a smile to grace his face.

Zoro glanced over to the blond and noted the tears starting to form at the corners of his eyes, firmly trying to blink them away as he watched the ceremony. Catching Zoro's gaze, he turned to look at the other man and swiftly brought his hand up to try and dab the tears away while mouthing at Zoro across the isle, 'Shut up, moss.'

Zoro just smirked softly, turning his gaze back up to the altar where Vivi had taken her place next to Nami and the ceremony was beginning. Standing in front of each other, they hadn't taken their eyes off each other since the moment Vivi had stepped out and they had seen each other. Both of them laughed through their tears as they looked at each with such elation.

With everyone back in their seats, Luffy commenced the ceremony with a wide grin. Managing his way through his prepared speech with a rather incredible amount of seriousness, getting all the cues and formalities correct without managing to raise his voice once. Vows, rings, and words exchanged, they leaned in for a passionate kiss and Luffy finally seemed to break as he threw his script over his head – the index cards fluttering everywhere – as he let out an exuberant cry, “WOOHOO!”

Everyone rose and begun clapping happily, Nami and Vivi eventually pulling apart to wave to everyone with smiles riddled with laughter. Then Nami took Vivi's hand in hers and dragged her back down the aisle as everyone continued clapping until they were out of sight. Once the bridal parties had followed after them, everyone else was allowed to leave their seats and head over to the other side of the garden.

People went back to mingling and enjoying the bar until eventually both brides made their appearance in the yard to more cheers and yells of approval from guests. After a few hugs to several guests that intercepted her, Nami eventually managed to get free long enough to make her way over to where Zoro and Sanji had taken residence under one of the large willows shading the middle of the yard.

“Sanji! Zoro!”

“Darling!” Sanji crooned with an excited cheer, arms extending towards Nami as she made her way towards them. Front of her white gown in her hands to allow her to properly walk without fear of tripping over it as she practically threw herself into Sanji's arms. Dropping the front of her dress, she returned Sanji's hug before the blond eventually released her to get a proper look as he gushed, “You look a vision.”

Taking a spin to properly show off her dress, she came to a stop and grinned, “Thank you, Sanji!”

“You look beautiful, Nami.” Zoro agreed with a sincere nod.

“Are you saying I don't normally look fantastic?” She rounded on Zoro with a teasing wink.

“Yeah,” Zoro smirked with a drawl, “something like that.”
“Hey.” Both of them said in unison, the back of Sanji’s hand smacking Zoro’s arm at the same time Nami’s heel came down to kneed on the toes of his shoe. Zoro’s grin only widening as it was simply how he and Nami interacted; she had always liked to playfully antagonize him, and when he reciprocated it only seemed to make her approve of him more.

When Zoro and Sanji had initially returned from Croatia there had, understandably, been a lot of confusion from everyone. Nami had been surprisingly hostile in her protectiveness over Sanji, but after she had heard the whole story – or as much of it as they were able to tell – she had instead become remarkably grateful. But not before calling them both idiots for getting themselves into that situation in the first place.

“Did he cry?” Nami’s gaze flickered slyly over to Zoro.

“Oh, he cried.” Zoro confirmed with a smirk.

“Oh, of course!” Sanji crowed, ignoring Zoro completely as he proudly continued, “Who wouldn't cry for two beautiful angels such as yourselves.”

Their conversation broken as a cry from across the yard had all three glancing over at several older relatives trying to flag down the bride, “Nami!”

“Sorry!” Nami apologized rather sincerely, glancing back at them as she began to make her way towards the relatives calling for her, “Thank you so much for coming.”

“Go on,” Sanji urged with a smile, “We can catch up later; you have guests to entertain!”

“Es'suse me.”

Both men glanced down at the young girl who still had the corner of Sanji’s jacket grasped in her hand and was looking up at him expectantly while shyly pointing towards the dance floor. Sanji looked between the young girl and where she was gesturing before smiling, “Of course, my little lady.”

Bending down so he could offer her his arm, she latched on with a grin as Sanji guided her over to the floor with a hunched posture. Sending Zoro a small wave as he left which Zoro returned with a chuckle, nursing his near beer with lazy sips, watching as Sanji got the little girl to stand on his shoes before beginning to dance with her. A soft smile forced itself on Zoro’s face as he'd never quite get over the amazing soft side the man had.

As the music finished, the girl excitedly pulled Sanji into another dance and Zoro decided to let the man be as he made his way to the bar to get another drink. Just as he had gotten himself another drink and was beginning to make his way from the bar, a hand caught his elbow and he was wrenched to the side and into a rather flustered looking bride.

“Hey.” Zoro grunted, a little caught off guard before remembering himself, “Congratulations, Viv.”

“Thank you! I'm so glad you could make it!” She gushed happily, glancing around Zoro curiously before inquiring with a tad of concern, “Where's Sanji? I haven't seen him yet.”

Jerking his thumb over his shoulder towards the dance floor, Zoro explained, “He got roped into dancing.”

Glancing around Zoro, she got a good look at the floor and where Sanji was currently guiding the young girl into a spin which mostly consisted of him holding her hand above her as she ran in circles. A dopey smile on his face as it seemed he was having nearly as much fun entertaining the kid as she
was playing with him.

“Life’s a funny thing, isn't it?” Vivi tittered.

“Hm?” Zoro grunted, turning away from Sanji to face the woman again.

“Well, a year ago I was bringing you into the E.R. on a gurney,” Vivi explained with a giggle, “and now you're at my wedding with one of my best friends. I guess I just wouldn't have expected it.”

It definitely hadn't been where Zoro would have assumed he'd end up either; given the track his life had been on, this certainly hadn't even been on his radar of possibilities. But somehow he had managed to end up here, and it was the happiest he had ever been. Ending up on that gurney had been the luckiest thing that ever happened to him and he could easily admit that, “Getting hit by that truck was pretty lucky.”

The comment caused a rather unexpected snort of laughter from Vivi, hand coming out to lightly touch his arm as she levelled on Zoro seriously, “I wouldn't call that lucky. More like gross negligence on the driver's part.”

“No. Lucky.” Zoro disagreed, “It's how I got to meet all of you.”

“That's... sweet,” Vivi accepted with delicate tentativeness, “but I also hope that's not how you intend to make all your friends from now on?”

That earned a rather hearty chuckle from Zoro - certainly hoping he wouldn’t have to go through anything else that ludicrous again - as shook his head and reassured, “No. I think I'm good.”

“Well, I'm going to tell him.”

“Have you told that to Sanji?”

“Naw,” Zoro shook his head, “He doesn't need the ego boost.”

“We'll just se--”

A bunch of girls around Vivi's age came running over excitedly yelling, several offering drinks and others making to drag her over to the bar. Zoro made an awkward pointing motion, and sidestepped the crowd to make his way back towards where there were less young women screaming in his ears, making his way back to the dance floor to see if Sanji had managed to free himself when he ran into Brook.

“Zoro!” Brook announced jovially, “Enjoying the festivities?”

“Yeah.” Zoro grinned, “That piece you performed was beautiful, by the way.”

“Why thank you, Zoro.” Brook inclined with a formal bow, “I wrote it specifically for today. I've been working on it ever since they announced their engagement!

“I had no idea.” Zoro admitted, “That's wonderful.”

“I also performed one for Usopp and Kaya's. And I have a few more in the works,” Brook leaned in conspiratorially, elbow nudging Zoro's side as he muttered, “Maybe I'll be writing one for you soon.”
Zoro's face immediately lit up and he began waving his free hand nervously, “Oh, I don--”

“I already have a few others in mind,” Brook dismissed Zoro's words, completely oblivious to the whirlwind of thoughts he had stirred up in Zoro’s head, having not thought much about marriage since he had managed to finalize his divorce – with a little help from the CIA – with Kalifa several months ago. “I have one in mind for Franky.”

“Franky?” Zoro asked.

“He started dating this wonderful woman a few weeks ago,” Brook informed, “It's new but I can already tell it's something special; I have sense for these things. It's an old man thing; in the bones.”

“I'll take your word…” Trailing off, Zoro’s attention returned to the blond on the dance floor as Brook’s sudden insights regarding him and Sanji were still throwing him a little.

While he wasn't completely abject to the notion of marriage - especially to Sanji - he now realized it wasn't a solution to finding happiness. It was something you were lucky enough to share with someone you already loved; which meant despite being a declaration of love, it wasn’t the be-all-and-end-all way to show you cared. And Sanji had proven that time and time again to him every day.

It was in the little things; like how Sanji would get up a tad early on weekends to make pancakes, or would send Zoro a text on his work break with far too many emojis dictating his swooning, or would grab Zoro a blanket whenever he fell asleep on the couch in the afternoon. Zoro felt it every time came up behind the man to hug him while he was cooking, or when he’d see that content look on his face as he sipped a cup of tea Zoro had managed to anticipate him wanting, and even in the embarrassment he had had to endure while learning to dance in his efforts to impress a certain blond...

Zoro watched fondly as Sanji swept the young girl across the dance floor as she giggled wildly; music coming to an end as Zoro knew now was his best chance. Glancing over at Brook who was still babbling away about other musical pieces he was in the process of working on, he politely excused himself, “Sorry, Brook. Would you excuse me?”

Taken aback for only a moment, Brook waved a gracious hand, “Of course. I shall see you later, hm?”

“That'd be great.” Zoro inclined his head, waiting for Brook to begin making his way off towards the bar before Zoro turned back to the dance floor and made his way over. Setting his nearly finished drink down on a free table, he wove his way through empty seats and towards the dance floor.

Somehow following through on what he intended to do was more nerve wracking than anything he had ever had to deal with in the military. Hands sweaty as he desperately wiped them off on his pant legs before heading over to where Sanji was just saying farewell to his latest dance partner.

Little girl skipping off with a cheerful wave as Sanji straightened and turned in time to see Zoro approaching him. Eyes widening in surprise, he watched Zoro come to a stop in front of the blond and hold out a hand expectantly. Already aware that the back of his neck was inflamed with a blush and his cheeks weren't faring so well either.

Owlish eyes darted from Zoro's hand to his face in disbelief, however the excited smile that was working its way onto the blond's face was already making this whole thing worth it, “Really?”

“I'm already regretting it.” Zoro grumbled in embarrassment while waving his hand impatiently, “Let's get this over with.”
“You're quite the romancer.” Sanji teased sarcastically as he took Zoro's hand and allowed him to drag the blond onto the dance floor where several other couples were dancing to the slow music. Getting to a rather open space before turning to face Sanji and awkwardly reaching out to place his hand on the blond's hip; grateful that Sanji couldn't feel the clamminess of his palm through his jacket. “I didn't know you could dance.”

“I couldn't.” Zoro corrected honestly, finding his eyes falling to their feet as he desperately tried not to accidentally step on Sanji's finely polished dressed shoes. Chancing a glance up as he muttered much to his chagrin, “Robin taught me.”

“Oh?”

“Apparently she used to be quite good,” Zoro explained, “so she taught me enough so I wouldn't embarrass you.”

“Please,” Sanji scoffed as he adjusted their grips and began pulling Zoro into an entirely different set of steps, “with me leading? You'll be fine.”

Refraining from rolling his eye, he allowed the cocky blond to pull him along as he found it not nearly as hard to follow along once he had managed to relax his shoulders and stopped worrying everyone would stare. Mostly distracted by the man currently in his arms and the bewilderment he felt at the surreal situation he found himself in.

“What?” Sanji chuckled, clearly catching Zoro's stare.

Zoro grunted.

Smile wider this time, Sanji prodded, “What's with that look?”

Zoro shrugged. Continuing to allow Sanji to pull him lazily across the dance floor as his gaze wandered across the garden. Candles and fairy lights illuminating the quaint little area as people mingled with delighted conversation, sipping at champagne and celebrating; all of it so surreal in its simplicity.

“Just never thought I'd be doing this.” Zoro admitted softly, eyes returning to the man in his arms as he found himself once more mesmerized by the charming features that met his gaze. Even evening had begun to envelope the garden and the twinkling fairy lights began setting an entirely different atmosphere; illuminating Sanji's hair in a halo of gold and refracting like stars in his eyes.

A soft frown creased Sanji's brow as he retorted, “Doing what?”

“Settled down.” Zoro muttered, casting a look around at their surroundings as he recalled old words that had seemed so ridiculous at the time they were uttered but now seemed so wholesome. A house in a quaint little town, with a partner that he loved, and even a few dogs, “Living a simple life.”

...in a quiet town.

A loud, derisive snort pulled Zoro from his musing as he turned back to Sanji where the man was chuckling to himself in mild amusement. Now it was Zoro's turn to cock an eyebrow at Sanji's behaviour, “What?”

“I thought you of all people would understand...” Sanji murmured incredulously, shaking his head softly as a bright smile lit up Sanji's face, and Zoro had to stop to appreciate how young and beautiful the man looked when he was smiling. Their movements stilling for only a moment as Sanji chuckled with a shrug, “Life is never simple.”
A wry smile crooked Zoro’s face unexpectedly as he found himself considering Sanji’s words. Pulling them back into motion as he once more took the lead, he conceded, “You’re right, but you make it easy…”

~The End~

Chapter End Notes

Woooah! We made it to the end!

I just want to thank everyone that read this fic; it originally started off as a random oneshot inspired by a song and turned into this massive multi-chapter that took up a year of my life! Needless to say I had a lot of fun writing it, and I hope you had a lot of fun reading it! I also want to thank @pansexualop on tumblr for betaing for me and letting me bounce ideas off her whenever I was a little stumped! You're the best!!!

Also, even though I am happy to finally see the end, I'm not quite done with this world just yet. So for those of you that want more, there will be another fic out soon with several important moments written from Sanji's perspective.

Thank you all again for reading, and I look forward to hopefully seeing you on my next project :D

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!