The Game

by CharlieNozaki

Summary

Games aren’t real. Sanji knows this, even if, sometimes, he wishes they were. Life would be easier. Life would be better. Stupid cactus-heads wouldn’t be such damn thorns in his side. But video games have no control over that.... Right?

(Modern AU. Fantasy. [Slow burn] ZoSan. Includes artwork.)
Sanji sees it happen with his own eyes.

He sprints through the door, billowing smoke and stifling heat following quickly after.

Usopp is behind him. He knows he is, and he turns back to bravely face that doorway, expecting to see his friend following. Why wouldn’t he be? There’s a fucking fire!

But what he sees next surprises him. Sanji watches in shock as the door behind him disappears in the blink of an eye. That open doorway, their very escape route, pops out of existence, leaving only blank wall space where it used to stand.
He can still smell the smoke, but he can no longer see it, his breaths coming quicker, from sheer panic and disbelief, as he starts to hear muffled screams from the other side of that wall. The tortured screams of his friend.

Sanji loses it.

He runs for that wall, hands frantically feeling everywhere along the surface, as if the door may have turned invisible, but there’s nothing. Shaking fingers merely slide fruitlessly over flat wallpaper he’d bought to cover this wall only. He hadn’t had enough money to wallpaper the rest of the house.

There’s nothing to do. He bangs on the wall with fists, calling for his friend in the strange, garbled language they use to communicate, and he can’t bring himself to move from that spot.

He should probably break down a wall with the new kickboxing skill he’s finally leveled up as of five minutes ago. Or, better yet, he should probably try and escape himself. But no.

Sanji falls to his knees beside the wall, hands fistng in his hair, doubling over himself in horror. He has no control over himself. All he can do is kneel there, head shaking vigorously, hearing those screams continue for another minute.

Until there is silence. Absolute, deadly silence.

A laugh breaks it. A deep, menacing laugh that seems to resonate everywhere all at once. And suddenly, the door is back, just as quickly as it disappeared, with no evidence that it ever had.

He stares at it for a few seconds, unsure of what to do. But then, something compels him to get to his feet and open the door, despite the certainty of a fire still burning beyond.

It’s gone though, and inside, he’s faced with nothing but the charred remains of what used to be the computer room.

Everything is gone, the empty room ringed with black soot along the walls, and in fact, Usopp is gone too.

Sanji blinks blankly at the scene, unable to feel anything but confusion as eyes fixate on the one object that does remain.

A plain gravestone in the center of the room bearing Usopp’s name, and the spectral form of a dark, hooded figure holding a sickle, hovering by the stone, a skeletal hand curled over the top.

After a few seconds, the reaper begins to fade away with another malevolent chuckle. And Sanji is left, standing there alone, still in the chef’s uniform he’d changed into automatically when he made spaghetti earlier.

He is struck with one thought, in the absence of his friend.

He really has to go to the bathroom.

“Why would you do that!” Usopp whined, throwing up his arms and collapsing back in his chair, hard enough to send it swiveling in circles on its axis. “Now what am I supposed to do!”

“Just make a new Sim~” Sanji replied, the blond shooting a smirk over at his dark-haired friend, already clicking through to the furniture menu to replace everything lost in the room. “You can’t tell me you weren’t curious to see what would happen.”
“Yeah, but why did I have to be the sacrifice?” Usopp complained, huffing a breath and digging a
hand back into the bowl of popcorn situated on the desk for consolation. “My mechanics skill was all
leveled up, and now I gotta start over!”

“I earn the most money, is why! And it’ll only take you another day to get back to the same level
anyhow,” Sanji muttered, distracted by a series of couches with rather ridiculous descriptions. Eyes
lingered on that fancy loveseat before he asked, “Which couch do you like?”

But when he glanced over, the younger boy was still sulking in his direction, this time through a
mouthful of popcorn.

Sanji sighed. Then, he passed the mouse over to his friend reluctantly, rolling his own chair out of
the way.

Usopp grinned instantly, practically shooting his chair forward in his excitement, nearly bruising ribs
against the desk.

“First of all, none of this dumb modern stuff anymore,” the boy insisted, long nose an inch from the
computer screen as he clicked around. “I want a pirate’s lair! Fit to hold all of my millions of
crewmembers!”

“Pretty sure if you stuck a million Sims in one room, they’d all just spontaneously combust,” Sanji
mused, watching Usopp begin to drag more rustic-looking furniture out into the room, tapping a few
keys on the keyboard to rotate things around.

“No more fires!” Usopp yelped, hunching protectively over the mouse and keyboard so his friend
couldn’t reach it. “Miss Robin’s really been rubbing off on you…”

Sanji shrugged and flashed Usopp a broad grin, “I’m okay with that~ She was helping me with my
World History homework earlier~” He sighed dreamily and propped his chin on a hand. “She’s so
beautiful when she’s talking about medieval torture~”

“And you’re too impressionable,” Usopp mumbled, clicking and dragging a large black skull-and-
crossbones flag onto the wall of the room. “That’s a word Miss Robin taught me when she helped
me with my English homework.”

“What! Why was she helping you?” Sanji balked in rather childish jealousy.

“Because!” the other boy shot back, exasperation clear in his voice. “In case you forgot, I live here
too! And it’s kind of her job to take care of us!”

Usopp flicked his gaze to his friend, a bit of sadness glazing over his eyes for a brief moment.

“Anyway, I know she’s stayed a while---three years is a long time---but we can’t get too attached to
her. Sooner or later, she’ll leave too. Just like Shanks.”

There was something else behind his gaze, and, in fact, it was fear. It was enough to make Sanji
simmer down, sensing his friend’s upset, and feeling his own rising a little.

Dammit, this was why he’d wanted to play Sims in the first place, to avoid these facts of life. Or at
least...facts of their lives.

It wasn’t often that Usopp got pessimistic, and when he did, things were usually quite tense.

But Sanji didn’t want to spoil a fun Friday night for his friend, so he shut up, settling back down to
watch Usopp finish his virtual interior designing.

Thankfully, the boy was back to cheerful chatter and wild stories a minute later, tugging his bandana
tighter and jamming a thumb to his chest when he proudly declared himself captain of the clubhouse
he’d just finished building.

Usopp was one of the few who could truly distract him, after all. Usopp was one of the few who
could make him forget why he was here, why he continued to be here, even after six years.

He loved it here---he loved Sunny, he did. But he didn’t love why he was here.

Their house had a name---Thousand Sunny---and currently, nine of them lived there. None of the
kids by choice, but they’d formed about as close to a family as they could get over the past few
years---probably as close to a family as any of them had ever had.

Mr. Franky had built the place, a large, cheerful, and homey red house up on a grassy hill
overlooking the ocean. It was a commission from the city, and it should have been anyone’s dream to
live there. The property was sprawling, perfect for a bunch of stir-crazy kids who constantly needed
to be keeping themselves busy. Well, a bunch minus a certain lazy one who Sanji didn’t like to
concern himself with more than he had to.

Technically, its full name was the Thousand Sunny Home for Youths, its purpose to rehabilitate and
house kids who couldn’t live with their families for one reason or another. At least that was Sanji’s
understanding of it, though most of them knew what it really was. An orphanage, for a group of six
kids who’d never been able to stick in a foster home.

There was a big difference between him and his friends though.

Most of them had been wanted.

“Boys, computer time’s almost up~”

A voice in the doorway, and Sanji and Usopp turned to look behind them at Miss Robin.

The tall woman was leaning against the white door frame with an enigmatic smile, shoulder-length
hair pulled up halfway in the style Sanji thought looked especially pretty. It was no secret he had a
thing for her, despite her being twenty-five years old. Bit of an age difference, but what was nine
years in the end?

“Yes, Miss Robin~” he crooned obediently, quickly pushing up from the desk and sweeping away a
few crumbs with his hand.

Three years ago, Miss Robin had come to volunteer. And three years ago, Luffy had convinced her,
rather easily, to stay on full-time. Luffy had been there the longest out of any of them, left there by
his grandpa when his dad up and split. Still, winning people over was a talent of his.

But the kid was hyperactive and often destructive, simply for lack of self-awareness. He’d been too
difficult for most foster parents to handle.

But he’d become their little “leader” of sorts, and if he actually left, Sanji wasn’t sure what the rest of
them would do.

Usopp reluctantly shut down the game, rolling his eyes at his friend who was practically humming to
himself with barely-contained glee as he followed Robin’s orders. Honestly, Sanji was hopeless, a
mess of raging hormones, perhaps the worst out of all of them.
It had gotten late though, later than either of them had realized. Sure, it was Friday, but they were pretty beat from school. Neither Sanji nor Usopp had too many complaints about being torn away from their game.

Sanji gathered up the popcorn bowl, tucking it under his arm and crossing the room to the door, Usopp following.

“Don’t worry, Miss Robin~ I’ll wash the dishes~” the blond assured, and whisked past the woman, enjoying the blissful scent of her lavender perfume as he headed off down the hall with a spring in his step.

“Thank you, Sanji~” Robin replied, smirking when he gave a little two-fingered salute at the end of the hallway before disappearing around the corner.

Robin brushed a hand gently over Usopp’s shoulder as the younger boy headed in the opposite direction for the stairs, now eager to join Luffy and Chopper in their shared bedroom for a few rounds of storytelling.

“I think Chopper might need some cheering up,” Robin suggested quietly. “Apparently some of his classmates were teasing him today.”

Usopp’s expression faltered only briefly, but confidence quickly returned to his features, and he puffed out his chest valiantly.

“Naturally, Miss Robin, I, the great Captain Usopp, am the absolute best at cheer-upping! In fact, I once cheered up a crowd of a thousand mopey people!” he bragged. “This was, of course, after I helped Santa Claus deliver presents to all the children in the world, plus the ones living on the moon!”

Robin chuckled, patted his back, and nudged him towards his room.

“Good~” she replied. “I’m sure your skills will work wonders~”

Sanji sighed, having paused before entering the kitchen.

Chopper was being teased? Again? He still remembered all too clearly when the poor kid had come home in tears not two weeks ago, blue paint smeared all over his face, the work of some shitty assholes screwing with him during art class.

They’d managed to get most of it off using some vegetable oil, but it had still left his nose stained blue for a day or so afterward.

Chopper didn’t deserve that. He was only twelve, and he’d lost his dad at age seven. Not to mention, he was a fucking genius, so the boy was fully aware of how much he stood out in school, nearing high school proficiency in science and math especially.

The blond shook his head and continued heading for the kitchen.

It was probably his favorite place in the house. Cooking was his favorite hobby, and he was damn good at it, he knew. It was getting to the point now that Miss Robin was letting him prepare all the meals, trusting he could provide nutritional balance and knowing that he took note of everyone’s preferences with great care.

He’d wondered, for a while, if his skill would make him more attractive for potential adoption, but as he got older, and his pastries and hor d’oeuvres had no success, it simply turned into an escape for
him, another way to forget about the past.

It also made him feel closer to his mother, whose memory was beginning to fade slightly in his mind now that so many years had passed since her death. He wasn’t okay with this, and he was determined to preserve as much as possible of the woman who’d given him everything for as long as she could.

The kitchen was occupied, even this late. It was a huge room, with every appliance a chef could dream of and large windows which looked out onto the grassy backyard and the swimming pool they frequently made use of in summertime.

Mr. Franky was leaned up against the counter, bottle of cola in his hand, talking to a red-headed girl about the notebook she had between them.

As soon as the blond entered the room, the girl looked up, then quickly flagged him over.

“Oh, good, Sanji, c’mere,” Nami said. “What are you making this week? We’re doing the budget.”

Sanji smiled, heart fluttering in his chest a bit as he crossed over to the counter, hovering perhaps a little too close, eyes drifting to the smooth freckled skin of her neck and shoulder.

Her freckles were adorable, and he counted this as one of the ways he was fortunate in life, that he got to live with one of the most popular girls in school.

“Well, we already bought everything for this weekend. I want to make kebabs on Monday,” he said, meeting her gaze, a slight blush coming to his cheeks at their close proximity. “Tuesday, seafood pasta; Wednesday, steak for Luffy; Thursday and Friday, I hadn’t decided. Any suggestions~?”

Mr. Franky took a long swig of his cola and shrugged.

“Anything’s good with me, little bro. You still doin’ floats tomorrow night?”

Sanji rolled his eyes.

Honestly, the man’s hulking obsession with cola was almost as big as his form. Franky was a huge guy, whose hand practically dwarfed the glass bottle in its grasp. He was intimidating upon first glance, but that went away as soon as the man opened his mouth.

Mr. Franky was about as friendly as a person could be, and they wouldn’t be here without him.

He’d built the place, after all, and originally stayed around for maintenance and groundskeeping for several years. But he’d eventually become far too invested in the place and the lives of its inhabitants and come on as a full-time caretaker shortly after Miss Robin.

They all loved the guy, and he loved them, though most of the kids knew that Robin’s addition probably had a lot to do with his decision to stay. Everyone saw the looks they shot at each other from time to time.

“Yes, I’m doing floats,” Sanji replied, and turned back to the girl beside him. “Nami, would you like anything in particular~?”

“That orange chicken you made a few months ago was great,” she muttered distractedly, tapping her pencil against her lips before scribbling down a few numbers on the notebook page, hardly paying attention to the way he squirmed happily at her praise.
“Then orange chicken it is~” he assured. “And Friday, I can use the leftovers to make a stir fry~”

“Okay,” Nami nodded absently, writing down what he’d just said, then starting a little equation in the margin beside it.

She seemed quiet, more focused than usual. Of course, she was always focused when budgeting. It was something she was good at, and extremely diligent with, but there sure seemed to be something else.

Franky, meanwhile, had guzzled the rest of his drink. The man reached out a large hand to ruffle both of the kids’ hair before straightening and taking his empty glass to the sink for a rinse.

“How’s Vivi?” Sanji decided to ask, seizing the moment. He was curious about Nami’s new friend, whom she’d been growing very close with over the past few weeks. Vivi had just moved to their city, and it was rather rare for Nami to forge such a strong friendship with someone outside of their little group.

Because unfortunately, her popularity was fragile. If anyone found out she lived here—that her adoptive mother was dead and she’d been essentially rescued from an abusive home shortly after—that popularity might shatter on her instantly, but such was the way of high school.

Still, selfishly, it only made Sanji feel closer to her. She didn’t know where he came from, no one did, and he was okay with that, but he felt grateful he was one of the few who knew about her past. She understood, at least, that their experiences had some sort of similarities. He could see it in her eyes.

“She’s fine,” Nami replied shortly, setting her pencil on the counter, then abruptly changing the subject. “How much do you think the chicken will cost?”

He stared at her for a second, any butterflies that had been fluttering around his chest slowly dissipating at her tone.

“Not too much…..ten should be enough. Fifteen if you wanna be safe,” he answered, and ducked his head a little to try and get a better look at her face, which she kept steadily downturned.

“Nami, is everything okay?” he risked asking.

“Yes,” she answered in her usual guarded tone.

Sanji flicked eyes to Franky, who was still hovering near the sink.

The blond reached out a hand to slide it over hers, waiting until she lifted eyes to look up at him.

“Tell me? Later…?” he murmured, and he got what he was looking for.

She gave a quick and subtle nod, then nudged his hand away so she could go back to writing.

Sanji sighed, having no choice but to give up for now, so he went back to his original task, bringing the popcorn bowl over to the sink so he could wash it too.

Franky watched him as he did, tapping fingers against the counter in a bouncy rhythm.

“You headin’ to bed soon?” he asked, to which Sanji huffed out a breath as he scrubbed a sudsy sponge over the bowl.

“Depends if he’s awake,” the blond muttered.
But Franky just chuckled, despite the teen’s obvious annoyance. He reached out a hand to clap him on the back encouragingly, then pushed away from the counter and crossed the room towards the hallway.

“Well, I’m turnin’ in, you two~” he said with a wave. “Tomorrow we’re fixin’ the treehouse, so don’t go sleepin’ in too late.”

“No we ever?” Sanji heard Nami mumble behind him.

With Franky gone, the blond thought it was as good a time as ever for him to talk to the redhead, but as he turned around, he felt disappointment flood him when he saw her back retreating after Franky, having picked up her notebook and left the room too.

He sighed.

Nami was like that though. He supposed they all were in a way. They had all become very close. But none of them could deny, save for perhaps Luffy, that their walls were up. They trusted each other, loved each other, but they were kids and something was missing. All of this still felt too temporary, even after years, and Sanji desperately wished that things could get better. If not for him, then for his friends.

Sanji, lost in his thoughts, hadn’t noticed that he’d actually finished all the waiting dishes, some put there after dinner when someone (or two) had snuck in and pilfered some ice cream.

He dried them off and put them away, then took one last glance around the empty kitchen, checking to make sure there was nothing else out of place before he too left the room and made his way back down the long hallway to the stairs.

The house was an odd combination of rustic decor, dark wood floors and even walls in some places, mixed with vibrant red in others, white trim around doorways. It should have been obnoxious, but somehow it managed to be charming, not to mention sturdy. It kind of had to be, given the roughhousing (and sometimes full-on fights) that often broke out.

That was Franky’s building style. And Sunny had always served them well.

The blond walked past the photo-lined walls and strode up the stairs.

Mr. Brook’s door, just at the top, was closed, but he was old, and thus usually asleep at this hour. Sanji didn’t know how an eighty-five-year-old managed to stay spry enough to help care for their bunch of crazy kids, but he managed. He’d been a rock musician when he was younger….maybe that was what gave him some of his energy.

Sanji remembered when they’d first been told Brook was coming. That an elderly man who’d never been married was going to volunteer. They’d all been skeptical, expecting a dusty old skeleton to show up, but Mr. Brook was full of life and music, with a contagious laugh that made all of them feel better in their darkest moments. Thank fuck Luffy had begged him to move in.

Sanji saw the light on in Luffy, Chopper, and Usopp’s room, the door still wide open across the hall. He hadn’t been planning on stopping, but when he heard a screech of his name as he passed, he ducked his head in.

“Yeah?” he asked, only to see Luffy, the dark-haired boy manically waving at him from where he was perched atop his desk that rarely got used for schoolwork.

“Sanji! Usopp’s telling a story about you!” Luffy exclaimed, a blinding grin on his face.
Chopper sat on the bottom bunk, below Usopp’s bed, kicking his short legs with a look of awe on his face from Usopp’s tale, even when the long-nosed boy started shaking his head and making slashing motions over his neck.

“Oh, really? What kind of story?” Sanji asked slyly, staring Usopp down.

“About a prince!” Chopper chirped, thankfully looking happy, despite what Miss Robin had said earlier. “A prince who loves every princess and tries to marry them all! But then there’s a plot twist and instead he fa---!”

“Aaaand that’s that!” Usopp interrupted. “Hehe, because he----well, he has to marry one, not all of them, but---you know, he’s a prince! Totally badass and---”

“Usopp, you said badass!” Chopper blurted out, then slapped a palm over his face as he realized he’d just said it too. The curly-haired boy collapsed back onto his cotton candy pink sheets in a fit of giggles.

Luffy joined him for no reason, and then Usopp, rather nervously, and before long, Sanji was no longer needed in the conversation now that the three were lost in silliness.

“Good night,” Sanji called, leaving the weirdos to it with a shake of his head.

Franky’s door was open, with his TV blaring commercials, but he heard the shower running in the man’s bathroom. He must have been in there.

A sliver of light came from under Nami’s closed door, and he could hear soft voices, two of them. Nami was the only one of them, besides the adults, who had her own room, so Sanji had to assume Miss Robin was in with her.

Good. Nami would talk to her, and even if Sanji felt a twinge of disappointment, again, at being left out, maybe it was something that was best shared between the two females. As long as Nami was okay, that was all that mattered.

Robin’s room was dark and empty at the end of the hall.

That only left his own room across from that, the room that belonged to him, thank you very much, no matter how much certain brutes insisted they owned fifty percent.

This was how it had always been though. There hadn’t been extra space for him, when he was first brought to the house, so he’d had to share a bedroom. And still, there was no way around that, though sometimes he thought he’d prefer sleeping on the couch.

The door was closed, but his roommate was awake. He saw the light on, heard the sound of muffled music coming from beyond. It was that terrible metal that he swore the guy listened to just to annoy him. Didn’t he know what headphones were for?

There was already a scowl on Sanji’s face when he barged right in without knocking.

And of course, that was the first thing the idiot bitched about as soon as he entered.

“Uh, what the fuck happened to knocking?” a tough voice complained from the left side of the room, his roommate’s form stretched out on the bed with his arms folded behind his head, eyes closed and his phone on his chest as it blared that god-awful excuse for music.

“Shut up. It’s my room,” Sanji shot back, taking extra care to step onto his roommate’s side of the
long line of blue painter’s tape that stretched the length of the carpet, over the nightstand between their beds and even up the opposite wall.

His roommate twitched, as if sensing the disturbance, and cracked an eye open, glaring Sanji’s way, as if that would intimidate him into staying on his side.

Like a dumb punk with shitty dyed green hair would be enough to intimidate anyway.

“Turn the music off. I’ve got planning to do,” Sanji insisted, shutting the door behind him and reaching up to pull his sweater over his head, taking time to fold it neatly and place it in his laundry basket before flopping down onto his own bed across the room in his undershirt and jeans.

“I was here first. Go somewhere else,” the stupid mosshead grumbled, even going so far as to turn up the music louder when Sanji reached to the nightstand for his notebook and pencil.

“I can’t,” the blond shot back, propping up a few pillows and making himself comfortable, despite the idiot’s words. “It’s almost lights out.”

“Oh, right, because you always follow the stupid rules,” the other teen snarked, closing eyes again and making no move to accommodate for Sanji. “Idiot…”

“What was that?” Sanji growled, unable to resist rising to the bait. But his roommate just shrugged and went back to ignoring him once more.

Honestly, if he wasn’t forced to live in the same room as this guy, he wouldn’t give him the time of day. It didn’t matter that Zoro—what kind of weird name was that anyway?—had been here longer than him. It didn’t matter that everyone else loved him, that Luffy looked up to him, and Chopper practically worshipped him.

Sanji hated him. The bastard had been nothing but nasty to him since the beginning, and he didn’t fucking know why. He’d never done anything to step on the guy’s toes. Sanji had been polite and kind, at first, knowing they were both likely here for similar reasons. But Zoro had deemed him unworthy of even respect, and ever since, they’d done nothing but argue and fight.

It was the fights that got them in trouble.

Fighting at home was one thing. It often earned them a scolding, but that was all. But they went to the same high school. They were both juniors; they somehow shared a lot of the same classes despite Zoro being as stupid as they came, as far as Sanji was concerned. And Luffy usually insisted on them all sitting together at lunch if their schedules coincided, now that he and Usopp were freshmen at the same school.

Sometimes, Sanji couldn’t fucking help himself from kicking the mosshead’s ass, even at school, and it had landed them in detention more times than he could count.

The most satisfying time had been when Zoro had gotten suspended for a few days. They’d both been arguing, but Zoro had thrown the first punch, and that was what the principal witnessed. Of course, the grassheaded idiot’s apparent hatred for Sanji had only gotten worse after that, but Sanji didn’t much care. The guy wanted to be a dick? He’d be an even bigger dick right back.

He just didn’t understand it though. Zoro was only a dick to him. With everyone else, he was normal. He was gentle and patient with Chopper. He screeched a lot when antics got too crazy or he got pulled into shit he didn’t want to do, but he was still good to everyone else.
It was only Sanji who got the shit end of the stick.

And it was only Sanji who had to share a room with him. It was the worst.

The blond sat there for all of five minutes, trying to write out a few recipe ideas he’d had, scrolling through his phone to look at his notes.

But it was no use. Little by little, eyes began to drift more and more frequently over to Zoro, to his side of the room which looked like a bomb had exploded there. Clothes were tossed everywhere without care; his blankets were all rumpled, and his desk was used as nothing more than a makeshift trash can.

His music was still playing, and Sanji could tell from the rise and fall of Zoro’s chest that he wasn’t sleeping. His eyes stayed closed though, brows drawn down in that permanent scowl that always seemed to grace the neanderthal’s face, at least when he was around.

Sanji had seen him smile before. He knew Zoro was capable. And it served his face a hell of a lot better than that furrowed brow. But there sat that scowl, and the blond had to resist the urge to throw a pillow on top of it and hold it there.

A frustrated huff and Sanji knew he wasn’t going to be able to concentrate with the mosshead around. So he slammed his notebook shut irritably and plopped it back onto his side of the nightstand with his pencil.

From there, he slid off the bed and bent over to rummage underneath, pulling out the storage bin labeled, ‘Games.’

He grabbed his blue 3DS and a pair of earbuds, nudged the bin back under his bed and settled back down, turning on the device and plugging the headphones in.

He hadn’t had it for very long, only since Christmas, when all the kids in the house (including Zoro, apparently, though he seriously doubted that), had pooled their money and bought it for him. It had mostly been Usopp’s idea, Sanji assumed, but only because Sanji had asked to borrow his so many times.

It was a truly thoughtful gift. He hadn’t received too many of those in his lifetime.

Sanji hadn’t even noticed, in the time he scrolled through the menu screen of his 3DS, that Zoro had sat up and was eyeing him.

In fact, it wasn’t until he’d tapped his way through the opening title sequence of his game that he even felt the mosshead’s stare.

He glanced up in annoyance.

Zoro’s look, oddly, wasn’t one of disdain. His frown was still in place, but there was actually a curiosity in his gaze that hadn’t been there before.

Sanji stared back at him, eventually rolling his eyes and grunting, “What?”

“What are you playing?” Zoro asked, a question which, admittedly, surprised the blond.

Was Zoro really asking him a normal question like that?

He didn’t let his surprise show though, merely scoffed and went right back to his game, even turning
up the volume to drown the mosshead out in his headphones.

“None of your business,” he muttered, focusing on the screen.

He didn’t see the way Zoro’s brow furrowed a little more, almost in frustration with himself, before he too went back to his music.

The next day started out like any other at the house. Luffy nearly vacuumed up everyone’s breakfast and nearly broke the giant kitchen table for the second time that month, diving across it for Chopper’s hash browns.

After breakfast, Miss Robin and Nami had taken the car into town for some shopping. The boys had spent the morning helping Franky repair the huge treehouse he’d built on the edge of the woods behind the house, to varying degrees of usefulness.

Usopp was the most helpful. The boy had a knack for building and fixing things, and he loved to work on little robots and tinker with household items. Therefore, he knew exactly what Franky was looking for when he asked for certain tools, and could even handle many tasks completely on his own.

Sanji really wasn’t the best with that kind of thing, so he’d settled for helping to repaint some of the boards that had worn down over the winter. Unfortunately, Zoro had too, though he’d kept himself far on the upper level of the interior, up the winding stairs that encircled the massive trunk of the tree.

The blond could hear him and Chopper talking quietly above him, and Sanji cursed him for that fucking gentle tone the mosshead used, the way he cracked stupid jokes that made Chopper giggle every time.

Sanji slapped his paintbrush down harder onto the wood, trying to, instead, focus on Mr. Franky and Usopp’s conversation about space shuttle mechanics on the other side of the treehouse from him.

Outside and down below, Mr. Brook sat on the grass, having apparently given up on helping. But he was playing a lively tune on his ukelele and it was keeping Luffy interested and occupied, so there was that.

But Zoro…

He didn’t know why his mind continued to drift to the shithead. It didn’t always. The only explanation he could think of was that it was that time of year again….

This was the time of year Sanji had first come to the house, six years ago. Luffy, Zoro, Usopp, and Nami had already been living there, though they’d all been there less than a year when he came. That was back before Miss Robin and Mr. Franky.

Shanks had lived and worked there then, and he’d been amazing. Always friendly, always kind, good at helping with their studies, and entirely relaxed. He could handle Luffy better than anyone. But his mind had been elsewhere, they’d known. He’d loved them all, of course, and they still heard from him now and again, but he’d been a sailor, one of those insane deep sea fishermen who’d based himself out of Logue Town’s port, braving long voyages and storms to bring in big catches.

Eventually, the sea had called him back, and that was perhaps why Usopp had suggested Robin would go too. It was obvious her true passion wasn’t necessarily this. Hell, social work had only been one of her points of study in undergrad. They all knew she was looking to go back to school for a Master’s in history once she had enough money.
All of them had bigger dreams. And it was around this time of year, when Sanji remembered just why he hadn’t been able to dream big before, and he felt extra disdain for those that tried to bring him down.

Zoro wasn’t nearly as bad as his family had been. Hell no. The idiot was too dumb to really get under his skin, and Sanji didn’t give him any information about himself period. Nothing the mosshead could use against him in any way.

“Hey, Sanji.”

And, besides, he was tough now. He could hold his own.

“Sanji.”

He just hated that, even in a safe place like this, assholes still loved to give him a hard time.

“Sanji! Earth to Sanji!”

Finally, the blond noticed, a little dazedly, that Usopp was calling him.

He looked up, ducking his head so he could peer under the craft table in the middle of the space at his friend, still sitting on the other side of the treehouse with Franky.

“Yeah?” Sanji asked.

“After this, wanna ride over to the game store?” Usopp said. “See if there’s anything new?”

Well, he had to admit, it sounded better than anything he had planned, so Sanji nodded.

“Sure. Franky, can we take the bikes?”

“Course,” the man answered, glancing over with a thumbs-up, several nails poking out of his mouth and a hammer in the other hand.

So it was settled, and, an hour or so later, after cleaning up in the treehouse and getting changed into something a little more presentable than the old T-shirt and jeans he’d worn to do the painting, the blond made his way out to the garage and the line of bikes Mr. Franky kept in pristine presentation against one of the walls.

Sanji selected his favorite blue one and wheeled it out onto the driveway to wait for Usopp, checking the little backpack he’d brought to make sure he had his 3DS and his phone and shit.

A few minutes passed, and he heard the garage door open, followed by Usopp’s voice. But it wasn’t just Usopp who came out to join him.

Trailing behind the other boy was none other than Zoro, his ugly camouflage skateboard helmet on his head, straps dangling by his chin, and his even uglier, battered electric skateboard tucked under his arm. On top of everything, he was wearing a stupid black T-shirt with fucking swords on it, and some crazy lettering—Chinese? Japanese? Fuck if he knew. The weirdo was way too into all that samurai stuff.

“What the---why is he here?” Sanji immediately complained, hitching his thumb at the mosshead, who merely stalked up to Usopp’s other side and dropped his skateboard onto the ground with a load clatter.

“He wanted to come,” Usopp replied with a shrug, pulling his silver bike up next to Sanji’s.
The younger boy rolled up the sleeves of his sweatshirt, hiked up his backpack, then swung a leg over his bike, buckling up his own helmet and pulling the strap tight.

“Why? Are you buying something?” Sanji growled, putting on his own helmet and glaring at Zoro. “You never have any money.”

Zoro just shot a baleful look back at the blond before stepping up onto his skateboard, nearly rolling away before Usopp threw an arm out in front of him.

“Lemme lead the way, okay?” the boy said, and he shot a wary look at Sanji, hating to be in the middle of his and Zoro’s fighting.

A pleading look at Sanji, begging him silently not to start anything. Then Usopp pushed off and started riding down the driveway to the long private lane that wound back to the main road along the coast.

Zoro ignored Sanji entirely and kicked off to ride after him, leaving Sanji to stare after the two angrily.

He watched them go for a minute, disbelief on his face, before he eventually shook his head and hurried to catch up, muttering curses to himself all the way.

It wasn’t a long or difficult ride into town, especially with the speed they had going for them on the relatively flat pavement.

Logue Town was a beach town of sorts, with many kinds of accessible shops for the tourists that usually flooded from all over during the summer. And now that spring was here and the weather was getting nicer, it would have been a pleasant ride if Sanji didn’t have to look at the back of Zoro’s head the whole time.

A few times, Zoro nearly drifted off course, the idiot’s sense of direction worse than a fucking chicken with its head cut off, and Sanji took great pleasure in almost running him over to get him back on track.

Before long, they made it, though, to Mohmoo’s, a game shop that they frequented because of its selection of both new and vintage games for older consoles. The store was rather big, on the end of a fancy mall in the Sabaody Shopping Complex, and it, oddly, attached to the Mermaid Café, another favorite spot of Sanji’s, in particular, for its plethora of cute girls always on staff.

The place was located farther back from the beach, but still, the parking lot managed to have sand strewn about, and the smell of salt was in the air as they rode up to the store front, just a little sweaty from the ride and the warm air.

They locked up their bikes and helmets outside the entrance to the game shop, Zoro clipping his helmet to Usopp’s bike and sticking his board back under an arm. And then the three headed inside, Sanji insisting upon shoving his way in first so he no longer had to look at Zoro’s shitty cactus head anymore.

The store was pretty narrow, but it traveled far back, and upon entering with the tingling of the bells on the door, they were assaulted by a slew of racks with new releases that immediately had Usopp practically drooling with excitement.

He rushed to scour the shelves, and Sanji followed, the two of them chattering over what was new and whether it was worth it to buy now or later.
The two became so absorbed that it wasn’t until a good fifteen minutes later, when Usopp had begun trying out a demo of a racing game on one of the TVs, that Sanji realized their green eyesore of a tagalong wasn’t hovering nearby.

He looked around, not seeing Zoro anywhere in the surrounding area, and his stomach twisted in annoyance.

“Hey,” he said, nudging his friend’s arm. “Where’s the mosshead?”

“Huh? He’s not---? Oh, wait, hang on, this guy’s gonna pass me---no, no, no----yes! Safe! Okay, sorry. He’s not here?” Usopp asked distractedly, not taking his eyes from the screen as fingers frantically tapped the controller.

Sanji did another three-sixty before confirming that the idiot was, in fact, missing.

“No,” Sanji groaned, even peering out the window to see if he’d wandered outside, but his helmet was still clipped to Usopp’s bike, and though the vast parking lot was busy, he saw no sign of a walking broccoli.

“Maybe he’s in another aisle,” Usopp suggested, still focused on the many bananas he shot out the back of his silly-looking car. “Can you go check? I wanna finish this---aw, come on! Not the lightning bolt!”

“Why do I have to…?” the blond grumbled, despite having first noticed he was missing. But seeing as Usopp was thoroughly preoccupied with the game, he let out a long-suffering sigh and muttered, “Fine…”

Then he stalked off across the store, peering down every aisle. He honestly didn’t know how the moron was capable of getting himself lost in such a small space. He didn’t even have a gaming device of his own, and he never wanted to play any games, so Sanji had no fucking idea why he’d been so dead-set on coming.

He noticed that Zoro did weird things like this from time to time. Mostly, the guy kept to himself, but sometimes he’d decide to take part in the most random of activities with the rest of their little crew, and there was usually no rhyme or reason to his decisions.

It seemed he mostly liked to crash things Sanji was doing, and it irritated the hell out of the blond, who was almost certain he was doing it just to be irksome.

And now he was ruining another perfectly nice outing by up and disappearing. Though Sanji supposed it might work to his advantage if the fool was really gone for good.

He was nowhere.

Sanji walked up and down every aisle of the store and there was no mosshead to be found, so he began trudging his way back to Usopp.

And he would’ve missed him if he hadn’t glanced over through the archway that led to the connecting café.

He’d only been trying to catch a glimpse of Keimi, the cute girl from the swim team at school that he knew worked there on weekends.

But instead, he saw, over the circular white tables and beneath the hanging glass globes that resembled bubbles, a green head he didn’t want to see, up at the café’s counter.
The blond narrowed his eyes in confusion, wondering what the hell the idiot would be ordering from a place that was basically the polar opposite of his grimy aesthetic. He stood out entirely amongst the tropical pastels and the relaxing steel drum music that filled the place. Somehow, he couldn’t picture Zoro sipping on bubble tea and munching on seven-layer cake.

That was when he noticed, however, that the absolute idiot had a fucking game in his hand. Was he actually trying to purchase a game at the wrong fucking counter?

He should’ve left him to fucking fail at life. He should’ve walked away and pretended he didn’t know him, but he couldn’t help standing there and watching the scene unfold like some sort of natural disaster.

Zoro was talking to a tall, pale woman behind the counter with dark blue hair, dressed in a low-cut purple hooded sweatshirt. She had an amused look on her face, like she was humoring Zoro entirely as he appeared to be asking her something about the game in hand.

There was even a fucking line accumulating behind him now. The scene was so cringe-worthy, Sanji felt like he could die, until something strange happened. The woman took the game from Zoro, then moved out from behind the counter and signaled for him to follow her.

Zoro stared at her blankly, but sauntered after her, the two of them heading back towards the game shop where Sanji still stood.

As she got closer, Sanji could see the woman was stunningly beautiful, mature-looking, with hypnotic blue eyes and dark lipstick that gave her a classy vibe, despite her casual outfit.

Zoro spotted him gaping as they advanced, though he didn’t look troubled by Sanji’s staring.

In fact, when they got closer, he quirked a brow at the blond like Sanji was the one doing something weird.

The woman noticed Sanji standing there, and she paused, a curious little smile on her face as she looked down at him, much taller than she’d looked from a distance.

“Can I help you?” she asked, and Sanji stammered for a second, the teen admittedly a little flustered by her beauty.

“U-Uh, no, I’m just---just looking, thank you,” he stuttered with a nervous smile, and he averted eyes, trying to keep them glued to the neighboring game rack and not the one belonging to the woman.

She chuckled, raised an eyebrow endearingly, then continued walking back towards the counter, Zoro trailing behind.

Sanji couldn’t resist a hissed whisper to the idiot.

“What the hell were you doing? Are you stupid?” he mocked, but Zoro merely shrugged.

“The game was just a blank box on the shelf,” he mumbled. “I wanted to know what it was.”

“Yeah, but that’s the café! You seriously thought they could help you over there, genius?”

“It’s all one place,” Zoro justified, sounding annoyed with Sanji’s bitching. “She said she works here too.”
“Yeah, but---!”

“I’ll scan this for you boys, and we’ll see if we can’t determine what’s inside,” the woman said, and Sanji realized he’d followed the two all the way to the register, behind which sat a bored-looking man with long blond hair and odd triangular tattoos over his eyebrows. He sat absently shuffling through a deck of cards.

“Hawkins, take five,” she said, and waved the game box briefly as she slid over to the computer.

The man’s eyes shifted slowly to the game, which was indeed blank, just a white box with a barcode on the back and the clear plastic film overtop.

His expression remained unchanging, fingers casually flipping through the cards.

He picked three random ones from the deck and laid them out before him, almost as if he hadn’t heard the woman.

The five of clubs, nine of hearts, and ace of hearts appeared, and he stared at them for a long moment. Then he shrugged and gathered them up again, finally getting to his feet and heading off through a door that led to the back of the store.

The woman smirked, and began clicking away on the computer, leaning over the keyboard. It was here that Sanji noticed, for the first time, her nametag pinned to her sweatshirt, which read ‘Sharley’ in a scrawling cursive font.

Another few seconds, then she picked up a barcode scanner, swiping it over the game until a beep sounded and she set it down again.

A few more clicks, then she finally turned back to the boys, sliding the game over the counter towards them.

“Alright, because it’s a rather old release, I’ll lower the price for you to fifteen,” Sharley said expectantly.

Zoro and Sanji actually shared a baffled glance before Zoro squawked, “Oi, you didn’t even say what game it is. M’not buying somethin’ if I don’t know if it’s shitty or not.”

“No, you won’t,” she replied easily. “But your friend will.”

She jerked her chin at Sanji knowingly, who stood there, confused as ever.

“I---Forgive this imbecile’s language, ma’am. He’s not my friend,” the blond stammered, reaching out to pinch Zoro’s arm for good measure when the mosshead seemed ready to protest. “I---I’ll gladly consider your most generous of prices, but I’ll admit that I would like to know what game it is first.”

“Well, the game is for you to discover,” she said simply, resting her chin in a delicate palm, purple nails tapping a slow wave on her cheek. “Even I don’t know what it is. That’s for you to find out. You’re the one with the 3DS, right?”

Sanji stared, trying to decide if he was hearing right. As beautiful as she was, was this woman really trying to sell him some unknown game? Was it a mystery event of some sort? Maybe it was a low price, but he’d never had anything like this happen to him before.

Zoro was glaring at him; he could feel it. And it seemed enough like a challenge, that, a second later,
Sanji began pulling out his wallet and dished out the cash for the game.

Even if he didn’t know what it was, fuck it. He’d at least keep the mosshead from buying it. Whether he wanted it or not.

Still, he felt the need to mutter, “This better not be a waste of money,” to the fool as Sharley rang him up with a smirk on her face.

He managed to smile and thank her graciously by the time the transaction was over, switching his face right back to a scowl as he brushed past Zoro irritably with the bag Sharley had given him.

Zoro just rolled his eyes and followed Sanji back to where Usopp was finally wrapping up his demo game.

The long-nose picked up his backpack off the floor by his feet. He noticed Sanji’s shopping bag though, and he raised a brow.

“You find something?”

“Yeah, I did,” Sanji replied, ignoring Zoro’s look of indignance, as if he wanted the credit for finding it. “Something real cheap. Don’t know what it is though. It’s a mystery. So it’s probably either really good or really shitty.”

“ Weird,” Usopp replied with a laugh. “You’ll have to tell me what it is.”

“What about you?” the blond asked. “Getting anything?”

“Nah, not today,” Usopp answered, the three of them automatically drifting towards the exit. “Think I’ll come back next week to see if they have any new Amiibos. Least I could leave my name on the high-score board. Wasn’t a total waste~”

Sanji glanced back at the TV screen, which proudly flashed ‘Captain Usopp’ in the number one spot. “Let’s get back,” the blond said, shaking his head as they headed out the door. “Before Luffy eats every damn snack in the house…”

The ride back to Sunny was considerably more pleasant, as Usopp let Sanji take the lead, the younger boy hanging back to ride next to Zoro, the two of them talking casually about some kind of sword-related thing that Sanji had no clue about. Again, Zoro’s normality with everyone but him only served to annoy him, so he sped up, standing up on his bike and pedaling faster to put some distance between them.

The salty breeze on his face, the warm hues of the sand and tall grass when they again reached the beachfront road… it was a perfect day, and he sure as hell looked free riding back to that welcoming red house on the hill, now visible when he came around the bend.

So why couldn’t he be satisfied with just this? Why couldn’t he appreciate where he was now and all he had to be thankful for, here in a safe environment with people he cared about and who genuinely cared about him?

It was frustrating to him, that he didn’t know why he felt restless, why he wanted further validation.

Maybe because he knew he was too old, that at age sixteen, his chances of adoption or moving on to a permanent home were slim to none. It essentially meant that, after he graduated high school, he’d
have nowhere to go. They couldn’t legally live in the house once they reached eighteen, and he’d be on his own, with no money for further schooling, no means to become a professional chef, have his own restaurant, none of it.

He wouldn’t stop fighting, but damn….it was disheartening, to think that something about him would always be undesirable.

It was no good thinking like that though. Not when he should be enjoying this warm sunshine, the colorful umbrellas that lined the beach, and the promise of cooking some nice grilled salmon for dinner that night.

Not to mention the new game currently dangling in its bag from his handlebars. Even if he didn’t know what it was, there was still that eager anticipation that always came with getting to play something new.

He looked behind him as he neared the driveway, saw Usopp and Zoro rather far behind now, but on their way nonetheless, so he went ahead and coasted onto the driveway, braking to a halt just outside the still-open garage.

Miss Robin’s stylish black car was back, meaning she and Nami had returned from their shopping. If he was lucky, he might get to see Nami model some new clothes.

That thought alone chased some of his lingering negativity away as he parked his bike and headed back into the house, twirling the game bag on a finger.

It wasn’t until hours later, after dinner and ice cream floats had been cleaned up and everyone else was occupied with a movie, an animated favorite of theirs about space pirates on an intergalactic treasure hunt, that Sanji stole away to his bedroom, taking advantage of the mosshead’s absence for some much needed peace and quiet.

He changed into some comfy sweatpants and a T-shirt that was secretly one of his favorites, even if it was covered in a pattern of little white ducks, and curled up on his bed, beneath the posters on his wall of tranquil ocean scenes.

The blond wrote in his notebook for a little while, in the pleasant light of his bedside lamp, jotting down a few recipes, things he hadn’t been able to do the previous night thanks to rude roommates.

But soon, it was decided. Time to pop in that new game of his and see what the hell it was.

He set his notebook aside and grabbed up his 3DS as well as the game box, still wrapped in plastic.

Sanji picked at the wrapping with a nail until he could get an end lifted and peel the rest off. He tossed the waste, then cracked open the box with a satisfying sound, fully expecting to find a labeled cartridge and the usual little instruction booklets inside.

What he found surprised him.

There was a game cartridge, yes. But nothing else, and the cartridge itself was entirely blank, no label or sticker or anything. Just a small plain gray cartridge.

“What the fuck…?” he muttered to himself, popping it out of the box and turning it over. No serial number, no nothing, and Sanji began to wonder if he hadn’t been duped completely.

It didn’t even look like a sticker had been picked off the cartridge. It looked like it had been blank
from the start. He’d never seen anything like it.

He debated even trying to play it, thought about leaving it and taking it right back to the store the next day for a refund.

But his curiosity got the better of him, and he found himself sticking the cartridge into his 3DS and powering it on.

It was a little creepy actually. Part of him wondered if his device would be infected by some demonic virus that completely killed his hardware, especially when he saw that the cartridge registered, but had no animated icon or title on the menu screen.

Was this even a thing? He thought about Googling it, especially after an experimental click to start the game yielded nothing for a good long minute.

But just as he was about to turn off his device and scour the internet, his screen went black and a low orchestral score began to emanate from the speakers.

He nearly dropped his 3DS in surprise when the thing suddenly rumbled in his grasp, something he knew it wasn’t capable of doing.

The music continued, swelling to a higher register before quieting entirely to the sounds of ocean waves, and the screen suddenly transitioned to show a sparkling ocean under a colorful sunset. A tall figure stood overlooking the scene, the man silhouetted against the horizon as the camera swept over him, a cape flapping dramatically off one shoulder.

And then, another transition, this time showing a bright sparkling castle on the coast, just before the sky turned dark and cloudy, the music taking a dramatic turn.

Suddenly, the screen played a well-animated battle scene, zooming in close to show certain fighters in greater detail.

And this time, Sanji really did drop the device, cowering back from it with eyes wide as it flopped onto his mattress….

Because his friends were flashing across the screen, looking several years older as they fought an intense battle against faceless opponents, but it was definitely them, and what the fuck?

Getting over his initial shock, the blond leaned forward to hover over his 3DS, watching as the camera whirled around an older Usopp, nailing enemies with a hefty slingshot before effortlessly shifting to a large gun. There was Nami, wearing a brilliant armored suit, looking fierce as she extended a staff and fired what looked to be a magical spell from it.

Miss Robin was there too, dressed in a long iridescent cloak, holding a tome under her arm, the action slowing down when she twirled in a dramatic circle, a purple glow to her hand which seemed to rejuvenate a stumbling Franky as soon as it made contact with his arm.

The man straightened and smirked, immediately whipping out a large cannon that took out at least twenty approaching soldiers, leaving an opening for Brook to rush through, wearing a fancy suit and wielding a long saber which he effortlessly slashed through another group of enemies.

He shot a wink at Chopper, who went cantering by on a large chestnut horse, certainly not a little kid anymore with a lance in hand as he too made quick work of those in his way.

The view zoomed closer to the edge of a tall cliff, where suddenly, Luffy appeared, physically
punching enemy soldiers, his fists almost vibrating with a powerful red aura. It almost looked like his whole body was steaming as his back met Zoro’s, the two of them surrounded by a circle of enemies. Somehow, despite the heavy knight’s armor he wore, the mosshead was managing to wield not one, not two, but three long swords, one gripped tightly by his teeth.

He lashed out with them like they weighed nothing, shooting a confident smirk at Luffy before the two broke apart, leaving Sanji with just enough time to catch a glimpse of the scar that sliced down over Zoro’s closed left eye.

And that was when Sanji saw a final figure, kicking away hordes of enemies with a leg that had burst into flames, the camera sweeping up to him with impressive speed as the music reached a bold climax.

The action slowed again, just as the man’s face came into view, blond hair falling over one eye and a grin on his face that showed no self-doubt whatsoever.

Sanji was looking at himself, just before the shot panned up to a bright image of a blazing sun above, then plunged into darkness once more, the music fading away as well.

He sat there, still hunched over his 3DS, eyes wide with shock, amazement, and confusion, all balled into one jumble that left him not knowing how to feel. Hell, he wasn’t sure if what he had just witnessed was even real, even as a simple selection menu suddenly appeared over the blackness of the screen.

It was a simple yes or no question, but he didn’t answer it just yet, couldn’t quite move.

Of course, he found he could indeed move when, unexpectedly, the door to the room swung open, and Zoro walked in, the mosshead seeming to pay him no mind as he crossed over to his mess of a closet.

Sanji startled, heart pounding in his chest as he blinked at Zoro, who was, oddly, rubbing at his left eye as if it was sore. He looked sweaty too, like he’d just worked out for hours, when Sanji was pretty sure he’d only been downstairs watching the movie with the rest of them.

He swallowed, watching as Zoro rummaged around in the explosion of clothes and shit that lived in his closet for a towel, which he threw over his shoulder, stalking back towards the door without further word.

Sanji huffed out a breath, gathered his wits, and finally asked, “The hell’s wrong with you, mosshead?”

Zoro didn’t even look at him, just kept walking for the door with a hand pressed against the left side of his face.

“Eye hurts….” he muttered, and then he was gone, heading out into the hallway, the door shutting behind him.

Sanji was alone again, and he froze where he was for another few moments before slowly lowering his gaze back down to his 3DS on the bed, which still flashed that one-word question.

He honestly didn’t know what the hell was going on, why the characters in that intro had been spitting images of the people he lived with. If he’d dreamt it, then this was a really fucking vivid dream.

‘Proceed?’ that question read.
He took a deep breath and picked up his 3DS with hands that trembled slightly from both nerves and excitement.

‘Yes,’ he selected.
The first time Sir Zorin dies, there is panic.

There is absolute panic because their journey hasn’t even begun.

They haven’t even left the castle grounds. The troupe of them were supposed to make it all the way to Whole Cakia, to escort Prince Sanjius on his long trek from the seaside kingdom of Baratia to meet his betrothed, despite his adamant denials that he even needs escorting.

The prince had chosen his best knights to accompany him, his best mages and healers, even his gentleman-in-waiting, who is more than capable of wielding a saber, despite his advanced age. People he trusts with his life, that he trusts not to die themselves, even though a war has broken out between the two kingdoms and they must traverse directly through the battle-ravaged mountains.

But it’s the early morning before they’re due to leave when Lord Mihas appears, and the one knight Sanjius had been reluctant to bring, regardless of his strength, goes and does something immensely stupid.

Zorin chooses to challenge Lord Mihas.

He abandons his duties, ignores orders and walks right up to the greatest swordsman in the land. He’s not even wearing his full armor, just a flimsy tunic and a layer of chainmail he hastily threw on as soon as he learned Mihas was approaching, floating up to the seaside castle on a tiny boat that doesn’t seem like it would make it past the Red Line Reef.

Sir Luffient had been outside too, him and Zorin out on the sparring grounds by the sea, training together before their daily duties began (not that either were very diligent about completing them, even the day before a journey).

But it’s Sir Usio, one of the prince’s most trusted knights, if not his most powerful, that comes rushing into the prince’s quarters as he prepares for the day, nearly shouting in his face about the very big problem that’s appeared on their shores.

They make it to the sparring grounds just in time to hear Luffient scream Zorin’s name, his fists cracking the wood of the fence from how hard he’s gripping it.

There’s not a sound from Zorin as Mihas slices his massive black sword diagonally across his torso. No cry of pain, hardly even a twitch, even as a fountain of blood sprays from the wound and he falls back to the ground, unmoving.

Sanjius has never worried about the brute before, hardly felt anything for him other than annoyance, most of the time indifference.

But, perhaps all too late, he feels a pang of fear shoot through him. A selfish fear, not for Zorin, but for himself.

Of course, Sir Luffient and the others are still there to help him get to Whole Cakia, but it’s no secret that Sir Zorin is one of the most formidable knights he has. He came to them a year ago, mysteriously, fully trained and ready to serve the kingdom, and ever since, he’s brought nothing but value to the royal army.

And yet, there he is, foolishly giving up everything, just to lose to a man of far greater skill.
Mihas looks down at him for a long moment, at the scattered pieces of his two broken swords, at the useless chainmail, now sliced in two and soaked in blood that seeps through his tunic beneath, staining it red. Even his face is a bloody mess where the blade nicked over his left eye and left an ugly gaping wound.

The older swordsman’s stoic face looks almost with pity upon him before he finally returns his sword to the sheath strapped on his back and turns on his heel, ready to go back to his boat.

But then there’s a cough, a few choked breaths as Zorin tries to force air past the blood clogging his throat and mouth, at least enough to huff out what he wants to say.

Mihas pauses, his gaze turning ever so slightly down to look at the blood now pooling in the sandy ground, slowly creeping its way towards his leather boots.

“This isn’t over….” Zorin finally gets out, barely louder than a whisper. “I’ll get…stronger…”

It’s all he can manage before another cough wracks his injured body and he has to focus his entire energy on simply getting enough air.

Sanjius sees Luffient let out a shuddering breath of his own, teeth gritted. His whole body trembles with the effort to keep himself from running out there. He can’t. It will only disgrace Zorin further.

So they can only watch as the tiniest of smirks comes to Mihas’ face.

“Until we meet again, boy,” the man says.

Then he begins his slow, almost casual, walk anew, leaving behind him the still-triumphantly fluttering banners of the training ground, treading onto the flagstone path that leads back to the docks.

It’s unclear why he’s even come, but as soon as he’s gone, the spell keeping them rooted to the spot seemingly breaks, and the three of them have vaulted over the fence into the training ring, kicking up dust behind them as they sprint to Zorin’s side.

Luffient and Usio fall to their knees beside him, uncaring of the blood that gets on their clothes.

Usio hovers trembling fingers over Zorin’s mouth, using his limited medical knowledge to try and feel for his breathing, because he’s no longer moving, no longer making those horrible choked sounds.

Luffient grabs his shoulders, yells in Zorin’s face, shakes him violently, tears—that are stronger than his denial---pricking at his eyes.

It’s no use.

Sanjius can see this as he stands over them, watching the color drain from Zorin’s face, seeing the life practically seeping out along with his blood.

Zorin is gone, and the world seems to fade to black with him.

Zoro didn’t understand why---when he was suddenly awakened the next morning by a gentle hand on his shoulder---why Sanji wasn’t gone, as he normally was. The blond was usually up, dressed, and off starting breakfast or some shit by at least five in the morning. But the first thing Zoro noticed upon barely blinking awake, was Sanji still curled in his bed across the room, a gleeful little look on
his face as he tapped away on his 3DS.

He’d stayed up later than Zoro too. He knew this because by the time he’d passed out, Sanji’s head, silhouetted against the light of the handheld, was the last thing he saw in the darkness before closing his eyes.

And so, Zoro’s first thought was not to wonder why Miss Robin was standing over him with a smile on her face.

No, he was entirely preoccupied with whatever the hell Sanji was doing. But that wasn’t exactly something that surprised him anymore as of late.

“Zoro. I’m sorry to wake you so early,” Robin murmured quietly, fully dressed in a green and white striped sweater dress, her hair pulled back in a high ponytail. “But I’ve just received a call from the social services office. A couple has expressed interest in meeting you. They’ve scheduled an interview for later today. A potential new living arrangement.”

This was more than enough to break the teen’s lethargy. Eyes shot open wide, and he pushed up to his elbows a little clumsily, hastily wiping some dried drool off his face, hair sticking up every which way.

“Wh---What?” he stuttered, and he noticed the way Sanji’s attention was also ripped from his game, the blond pulling out his earbuds and slowly sitting up.

“Yes,” Robin said, her smile turning a little sad, though that sadness disappeared quickly, probably for Zoro’s sake. “If you could please be ready in an hour. I’ll be attending with you.”

Zoro’s eyes narrowed out of sheer confusion, trying to wrap his head around this.

All of them knew it was possible. They might have lived here, but the city’s child welfare office kept profiles on them, for possible adoption. It had happened before, namely with the younger kids, Luffy, Usopp, and Chopper. Chopper especially. They’d interviewed with prospective parents, even gone out on various outings with them if things got a little more serious.

But no matter how good they were, how charming or well-behaved, it never worked out. Almost always, they were told the parents had opted for a younger kid, or just hadn’t felt the right connection they knew they needed.

And the older they got, the less frequent those meetings became, to the point where none of them had even had such an interview for about seven months now, when Chopper’s last had been.

It was just a fact of life, and Zoro didn’t tend to dwell on it too much. He was content here. He was cared about here. He was fine now, felt more stable here at Sunny than he ever had before.

And yet now, someone had chosen him, was actually interested in him of all people.

Why…?

He sat up the rest of the way, rubbing at his hair, unaware that he was mussing it up further.

“Um…” he stuttered, for lack of anything better to say through his shock. “Okay…”

Robin’s lips turned up again, and she gave his shoulder a squeeze, then moved away to walk back towards the door.
A glance she shot at Sanji, whose face had paled, his gaze now fixed solemnly on a point on the floor.

She sighed.

“Sanji,” she said, in just as gentle a tone. An attempt at comfort. “If you’d like to relax, I can ask Franky to prepare breakfast this morning.”

The blond didn’t move, didn’t immediately perk up as he usually did when addressed by the woman. He just blinked, looking lost, a hand coming up to run over his mouth.

“Well…well, I had everything ready for omelettes…” he mumbled distractedly, and she nodded.

“It’s alright. I’m sure your meticulous labels will help him find what he needs,” she replied, barely masked concern on her face before she eventually retreated from the room, with a final reminder of, “One hour, Zoro,” before closing the door behind her.

This left the two of them in rather awkward silence.

Zoro knew. He paid attention, and he knew everything there was to know about the people he lived with. He’d always been a better listener than a talker, so it was really a no-brainer that he’d be fully aware of things—Usopp’s favorite color, the type of music Mr. Brook played on his violin when he was feeling nostalgic versus playful.

He knew seemingly trivial things—that Chopper wasn’t a fan of dark chocolate or too strong peppermint, and that Luffy liked to sit at the head of the table so he could see all of his makeshift family at once.

He picked up on Nami’s love of tangerines, for reasons that had to be more important than simply liking the taste. He could tell Robin and Franky both seemed to like each other, perhaps more than they’d ever admitted to.

And he knew how much Sanji wanted a home, a place to truly belong.

And that was why, above all, he felt guilty sitting there, having received the first interview he’d had in at least a year and a half. He knew Sanji had been waiting a month longer than that.

“Um….” Zoro stammered out, unsure of why he had when usually he tended to ignore the blond.

He knew the guy disliked him, of Zoro’s own fault, and he knew how awkward he was, so it was usually better for both of them if he kept their interactions short. Unless they were fighting, and that was mostly just him trying to keep up with the blond’s fiery temper.

“Shut up…” Sanji muttered before Zoro could even get out another word, the blond running a hand over his face before he abruptly flipped around in his bed to face the wall, curling on his side and pulling up the covers.

Zoro stared at him for a second, knowing there wasn’t anything he could do to make things better. After all, he’d been the one to push Sanji away first, all those years ago.

With nothing else to do, he sighed and threw back his own covers, yawning automatically and stretching his neck. Then he slid out of bed and got to his feet—only to nearly double over with a sudden sharp pain that hit him.

It was just like last night, his left eye throbbing uncomfortably for no reason, only this time, he could
feel a strange phantom sting slicing over his torso as well.

A hiss escaped through gritted teeth despite himself, even as the pain slowly subsided to nothing again. He must’ve slept in a weird position that was making him sore...

Sanji didn’t look over.

Zoro’s gaze lingered on the blond’s back for just another moment before he sighed and headed from the room, rubbing absently over his chest.

As soon as Zoro shut the door behind him, the hot, angry tears pricking at Sanji’s eyes seemed to double, and the blond had to turn his face into his pillow to try and keep from sobbing entirely, because that would be pathetic.

But he didn’t understand, dammit! Why the fuck would anyone be interested in Zoro? Yes, it was horrible of him to think such a thing, but why, when the idiot had done nothing—had nothing going for him—would someone suddenly show interest out of nowhere? After so long too?

Sanji felt a mean jealousy ebbing within him, fists clenching in his sheets, threatening to tear holes.

After a minute, he opened his eyes, gaze hardening as he stared at his blue wall.

He moved to put in his earbuds again, opened up his 3DS to the game he’d left paused.

Before all this, he’d been testing out playable characters in casual versus mode, getting a feel for the controls and enjoying kicking the absolute shit out of the character that looked like Zoro (aptly named Zorin) using a badass swordsman.

He still had no earthly idea how it was possible that each character could resemble people he knew.

After getting over his initial shock, he’d done a Google search for the game, but no such characters existed anywhere else that he could find. And if it was mere coincidence, well….there was no way that could be the case. Even the names were similar.

He had yet to tell anyone about the game, hadn’t even told Usopp.

But would anyone believe him? Usopp loved crazy stories and fantastical things, but this was something else entirely.

Still, somehow, this game showing up, almost magically, was the only thing that seemed catered specifically to him, and as much as he knew its existence was creepy and mysterious as hell, he didn’t care. It felt special, made him feel special. It was helping him feel better, and maybe it was best if he kept it to himself, at least until he calmed down.

It was his own little world where he could do whatever he wanted, take out his pain and frustrations.

The Zorin character was tough; he’d been difficult to kill, but Sanji had managed.

Time to see how many other deaths he could deal the ungrateful idiot.

By the time Zoro got himself dressed in a plain white T-shirt and jeans, probably the nicest outfit he owned, Sanji was still holed up in his bed, burrowed under the covers so his face wasn’t visible. But Zoro could hear the furious tapping of the buttons on his 3DS, so he knew Sanji was still playing.
At least he was putting the thing to good use.

It had been Zoro’s idea actually, to gift him the device around Christmas, as a peace offering of sorts—albeit one Sanji would have no idea came from him, seeing as they’d all pitched in to buy it, but it made him feel a little better nonetheless. He’d noticed the blond constantly wanting to borrow Usopp’s, and Zoro thought maybe having one of his own would make him a little more content….maybe a little nicer to him.

Not so much. Of course nothing changed between them.

Nothing had for six years.

Sanji had moved in a few months after him, and when he did, Zoro had still been in pain. He still hadn’t understood why his foster dad had given him up. Well, he did, but he didn’t. Koshiro’s real daughter had died, but why did that suddenly mean he didn’t want to look at Zoro anymore? Why did that mean he couldn’t keep Zoro around even though he had for a few years before that?

Zoro had come to Sunny confused and alone, and he hadn’t liked how Sanji reminded him of Kuina. He hadn’t liked that they had the same blunt way of talking, the same seriousness about their passions. He’d shut down, hadn’t liked talking to Sanji at first, because it just dredged up all the pain that was still so fresh.

Sanji hadn’t responded well to the attitude Zoro showed him, the way he’d hardly engage with the blond, and that rift had never been bridged. They’d gotten older, and Zoro had come to love this place, even more so than living with Koshiro.

His aversion to Sanji had long simmered, but now it was too late. Sanji’s dislike for him was cemented, and he foresaw nothing changing that, even if now, in his teenage years, he was starting to realize things about himself, or rather, things about the blond……things that weren’t good given the circumstances.

Yes, it was becoming more and more difficult to deny that he felt something….something fucking weird in his chest that he still didn’t quite understand. He felt it whenever the blond smiled, or whenever he laughed, dorked around with the younger boys.

Zoro had no fucking idea what to make of it, had never felt it this strongly with anyone else. He didn’t even know the blond, hardly. Not really, even after living together for so long. He’d observed, but not connected.

These were dumb things to think about anyway. It would never amount to anything, and it was probably just overactive hormones, even though he’d hoped beyond hope that he was immune to stupid stuff like that.

After all, he got similar feelings, a similar warmth whenever Luffy did something profound, reminded them why he’d made them all feel so safe and wanted, despite being younger than nearly all of them.

It could have been nothing at all. It was probably nothing at all.

And there was no use worrying about it now, when he had more pressing matters at hand.

As soon as he made his way downstairs, leaving Sanji to his game, and entered the kitchen, to the aroma of frying eggs and sausage, the room went quiet, despite the chatter he’d been walking into.

Everyone, save for Sanji, was there, in various states of wakefulness.
Franky was at the stove, though he glanced up, seeing Zoro stalk in out of the corner of his eye, Robin leaning against the counter beside him with a cup of coffee in her hands, now dressed in a nice black suit.

Brook and the three younger boys, still in their pajamas, were seated at the table, him and Usopp doing their best to distract Luffy from the cooking food with stories and songs. And Nami stood near the sink, fully dressed, juicing a pile of tangerines and oranges to make fresh juice.

All action stopped though, leaving Zoro standing there in the doorway, awkwardly blinking at all of them.

“What…?” he mumbled after a second, feeling self-conscious, and then the room erupted.

Luffy and Chopper rushed him, practically leaping onto his shoulders with heartfelt congratulations and babbled excitement about his interview, enough that Zoro couldn’t even get a word in, just stood there with the two hanging off him like a pair of monkeys.

Robin chuckled, sharing a glance with Franky, who turned around and grabbed a plate.

“Zoro-bro, you should eat somethin’ before you go~” he said, twirling his spatula before he shoveled food onto the plate. “Not gonna be nearly as good as anything Sanji-bro makes, but hey, it’s somethin’ to fuel the tank at least~”

Zoro nodded and walked over to the counter, dragging Luffy and Chopper with him, who showed no signs of letting go.

He pulled out a stool and took a seat, affording the two boys the chance to sit on either side of him, now fantasizing that the couple he was meeting were a pair of spies who’d take him to live in an undersea lair.

Franky handed over his plate, as well as a fork and knife, throwing Luffy a piece of toast to keep him occupied and away from Zoro’s plate for a few precious seconds.

That was when Nami came over with a glass of juice, slid it across the counter to him and paused, long enough that Zoro looked up at her questioningly.

“Good luck,” she said quietly, lips turning up a tiny bit.

He let out a sigh and nodded, knowing that this had to be hard for her too. She was like Sanji. She loved it here, but wanted an actual family, one that was forever.

Zoro started eating, surrounded by the familiar sounds of the house, casually ducking beneath flying limbs and hearing the usual carefree conversation.

And all too soon, it was time for him to leave, but he had a weird feeling as he and Robin walked to the car, as Franky clapped him on the back encouragingly, and Brook squeezed his shoulder, staying out on the front porch to watch them drive away.

He’d only be gone a few hours, but he didn’t like the feeling in the air. He didn’t like how final this felt, like things were about to change that day.

Him and Miss Robin rode in silence, Zoro watching the coast pass by, more and more buildings appearing as the road curved away from the ocean and headed towards the city center. There wasn’t anything he had to say, and thankfully, Miss Robin understood that.
He’d been wary, unwilling to trust her at first, thinking she’d leave soon after coming, but the longer she’d stayed with them, the better their relationship had become. She was older, but she seemed to understand why Zoro was quiet, that it didn’t necessarily mean he didn’t care.

The silence was only broken by the quiet chime of Robin’s phone ringing in the holder clipped to one of the air vents.

She glanced at the caller ID for a moment, then reached out to take the device from the holder entirely, bringing it to her ear to answer it.

“Hello, Robin Nico speaking,” she said quietly.

Zoro leaned his head against the window as he listened to her noises of acknowledgment, responding to the speaker on the other end.

It wasn’t until she inhaled a little more sharply, breathed out, “Is that so…?” that he finally looked over at her.

Her eyes flicked to his as she said, “Yes, shortly after?……I’ll tell him…….Thank you…”

Then, a few moments later, she bid farewell and hung up the phone, setting it back in the holder.

He stared at her, waiting for her to explain, knowing she would.

Robin stole another glance, smooth hands sliding down the steering wheel absently.

“That was the social services office again,” she said, and she smiled. “They have a second interview lined up for you. It seems quite a number of people are interested in you, Zoro.”

He blinked at her, unsure if he was hearing her correctly.

“A second…?” he muttered eventually in disbelief.

Robin nodded and reached out to squeeze his hand.

_For the second time, Prince Sanjius watches Zorin fall, this time shot down by a bolt of lightning from the godlike wizard._

_It’s impossible that Zorin is even here._

_Zorin was dead._

_All he remembers is seeing the mosshead lying there on the ground, bleeding out as his own vision tunnels, most likely with the shock._

_But after waking in his bed, unsure of how he’d gotten there again, only to have Sir Usio barge into his room just as before, panting and frantically stuttering that Zorin has been badly injured, Sanjius has no idea what is happening._

_It’s as if Usio doesn’t recall anything, as if nothing ever happened to Zorin in the first place._

_He has no choice but to follow him, rushing outside to the training grounds again to see the swordsman lying there on the ground, twitching as white electricity spasms through his body._

_Luffient is crunching down on the fence with fingers that crack pristine wood---wood that Sanjius is_
certain had already been cracked.

A tall blond man towers above Zorin, pale bare torso glistening with sweat, long jewelry hanging from stretched earlobes. His laugh is deep and hearty, and his eyes full of murderous glee.

Sanjius recognizes him from his history books. This man is a deity from myths, one that Sanjius has only ever seen illustrations of, but there’s no doubt it’s him. Eneluk.

There’s not even time to fear for his kingdom, to try and fathom how and why a god from legend has appeared here, with lightning magic crackling from his hands.

Zorin is dead, but he’s not. Or rather, he wasn’t, somehow, though Sanji can see the gnarled scar that pokes out above the collar of his tunic, the one on his face that is entirely healed, but still rather prominent, cutting through his left eye.

Eneluk is walking away, just as Mihas did, and Luffient and Usio are sprinting across the dirt to Zorin’s side.

The electricity is subsiding, and Zorin’s body lies completely still now, a horrible spidery bruise creeping over his chest and up his neck from where the lightning magic hit him.

Luffient is screaming for him, and Zorin isn’t breathing, but Sanjius doesn’t feel nearly as concerned this time.

Even as everything begins to fade away, no doubt the work of some memory magic that he’s somehow immune to, he knows that Luffient and Usio need not worry.

Zorin is immortal. There’s no other explanation. And he’s somehow kept it a damn secret all along.

A knock on his door, and Sanji looked up, torn back to reality by the sound.

Zoro left an hour ago, and he hadn’t moved, he realized, still flopped there in bed with his 3DS, taking great pleasure in killing off Zoro yet again.

It didn’t do anything to change his situation. Zoro was still going to a stupid interview, but watching the guy twitch on the ground, if only in a game, was providing him a bit of sick consolation through all this.

He was expecting Usopp, maybe Franky, checking to see if he was alive, but he certainly was not expecting to hear Nami’s voice.

“Sanji...?” she voiced from behind the closed door. “Are you awake?”

He bolted upright, still a fucking mess from sleep, hair rumpled, leftover tear tracks on his face. Fuck.

“Uh, yeah, just a second!” he yelped, quickly snapping shut his 3DS and kicking off his covers.

From there, he finger-combed his hair into some sort of order, straightened out his T-shirt and pulled on a pair of spare sweatpants over his boxers. No time to change into a proper outfit, but he rubbed his face, and tried to make himself at least a little bit presentable for Nami.

It was as good as he was going to get, so he straightened his bedsheets and pillows, called “Coming!” out to Nami, then headed to the door, tromping across Zoro’s side of the room purposefully as he did.
He opened the door, automatically throwing a charming smile onto his face.

“Good morning, Nami—” he started to say, but stopped, his expression falling when he saw how serious hers was.

She didn’t meet his eye, just reached a hand out to push his chest, making him stumble back into the room so she could walk in past him.

“Close the door,” she mumbled as she moved to take a seat on his bed, surprisingly.

He couldn’t help it. He felt his face heat, and his heart practically stop in his chest. Nothing was going to happen. There was no way it would, but it wasn’t often that Nami came into his room. In fact, she never did. And the two of them alone…? What could she possibly want…?

He swallowed, breaths coming lightly as he slowly did as she asked, shutting the door and making his way over to the bed as well.

What did he do? Where did he sit?

She didn’t give him any indication of what she wanted, so he tentatively took a seat on the mattress a few feet from her.

He felt self-conscious, not of his side of the room, because he knew it was pristine and stylish, but it was still a space that was personal to him, and he cared deeply, perhaps too much, about her impressions of him.

It took her a while to say anything, but Sanji didn’t press, just waited patiently for her to tell him what she came to him for.

Her gaze was fixed on Zoro’s empty side of the room when she finally murmured, “I can’t believe he got an interview….”

Sanji scoffed quietly, shaking his head, ultimately unsurprised that this was her chosen topic of conversation, as it was obviously still on his mind as well.

“Right?” he muttered bitterly, feeling a resurgence of jealousy within him and, with it, the urge to tear Zoro down. “An idiot like him….dunno why anyone would be interested…”

Nami shot him a look, one that was tired.

“That’s not what I meant…” she said, and he felt the sting of her scolding.

He wilted a little, averting his eyes and tugging absently at the blankets.

She sighed.

“I just…..it’s been so long since any of us have gotten an interview,” she continued. “I’m not sure if it gives me hope or what….”

She trailed off, letting out a frustrated breath.

Sanji risked glancing back over at her, and he saw how lost she looked. He saw himself, albeit minus his anger, but the apprehension and the melancholy was there.

“Makes you wish Miss Robin or Mr. Franky would just adopt us, huh,” he said with a little attempt at a smile.
She did turn lips up a bit too though.

“You know they would if they could…” she replied.

But of course, they didn’t have the money. And there were six of them. And both Robin and Franky had dreams and things they wanted to accomplish in life, apart from living here. He didn’t want to feel like they were being held back by staying.

Sanji knew that all of them would always have their support and love, and that was more than he could’ve ever hoped for. But he’d forever be a kid of the system, unless that miraculously changed. He’d always have that label and those memories of instability.

He glanced over at Nami, whose smile had fallen again, her brows drawn tight.

Nami was one of the strongest people he knew. It wasn’t often that she let her worry show, let alone talked about her feelings with anyone. As good as it felt to know she trusted him enough to talk to him, he knew it was probably because Robin was gone that she’d come to him.

Still, she was here, and her problems came first, so he ducked his head to try and meet her eye.

“Hey…Nami….is everything okay? I mean besides this shit with the mosshead…..” he murmured, hoping she wouldn’t shut him down again. “You don’t seem yourself.”

He remembered how she’d quieted as soon as he mentioned Vivi the night before…

And in fact, after sighing, that was exactly who she brought up when she finally turned to look at him.

“You asked about Vivi last night,” she said. “Well, there was no point in becoming friends with her. She’s leaving next month.”

Sanji instantly frowned, tilting his head in confusion.

“She’s leaving…? But she just moved here. Where is she going?”

“Her dad’s a diplomat,” Nami answered, defeat in her voice. “From overseas. They were never gonna stay here long. Apparently this amount of time is long for them. That’s why she actually came to our school….”

Sanji’s heart broke for her. He knew how much Nami valued friendship and loyalty, and how quick she was to cut people from her life should they not give her that. Vivi had been a great friend to her, as far as he knew, and to find out she would lose her too…

“I’m sorry, Nami…” he muttered, unsure of how to make her feel better about something that couldn’t be changed. “That’s so shitty…”

“Yeah…” Nami replied quietly. “She said she doesn’t like it….because she meets people, then has to leave them all the time. She said she’d rather be in one place.”

Nami didn’t sound convinced though, with that argument, and she confirmed this a second later when she continued, “But I mean, she’s the lucky one. She gets to travel….see the world. I wanna do that….”

Sanji wanted her to. He wanted all of his friends to have everything they wanted, to achieve all they wanted to achieve. Thankfully, he knew Nami, knew she was strong and driven. If anyone could do
whatever they set their mind to, she could.

He scooted a little closer to her on the bed, just subtly, but he didn’t want her to feel alone in that moment.

“I think you will one day, Nami,” he said with a tiny smile. “You’ll make it happen.” He couldn’t help a quiet chuckle then, holding her gaze when she looked up at him again. “I mean, out of all of us, you’re the one who’s gonna end up a billionaire~”

She couldn’t help the grin that came onto her face, one that was all too cunning now, and much more like her usual self.

“And I’ll be expecting you to repay me for all the times you ran over the food budget~”

“What?!” he yelped. “I’ve only done that once! I really have been keeping tra---”

“Relax. I’m kidding,” she assured, reaching out to pat his shoulder consolingly. “Besides, it’s that one who’s a million dollars in debt.” She jerked her chin towards Zoro’s empty bed. “Let’s hope he pays me back before he gets adopted…”

Sanji felt his heart sink all over again, brow furrowing as he stared at the mosshead’s ridiculous nest.

“No do you really think he’s gonna get adopted?” he asked.

His tone wasn’t skeptical this time. In fact, it was more worried, like it actually might happen, and then what? Would there be no hope for the rest of them? Or would they all get interviews too….?

“I dunno,” Nami replied with a slow shrug. “He’s actually kinda likable sometimes, y’know.”

She smirked at the grimace he pulled, then sighed and got to her feet.

“I made juice,” she said. “And I helped Franky clean up the kitchen. Also saved you a plate from breakfast. Though it’s probably gone by now if Luffy had his way.”

Sanji managed a smile, despite his lingering disappointment over the mosshead’s stupid opportunities.

“It’s alright, Nami. Your thoughtfulness is greatly appreciated~”

She nodded and made for the door, disgust crossing her features briefly when she nearly stepped in a pile of what looked to be Zoro’s underwear on the floor. She danced away from that as quickly as she could, and glanced back at Sanji, pointing a finger at the offending pile in disbelief.

“Trust me, I know,” Sanji grumbled. “Hence the tape….and the fifteen air fresheners.”

“Right,” Nami muttered, then slipped out the door, stopping just before she walked away to add, “I’ll see ya later, Sanji. Thanks. For listening.”

Then with one last little smile, she shut the door quietly behind her.

In a way, he was glad to see she’d bounced back rather quickly from feeling down. But he knew much of it was probably an act. He knew she still had to feel upset about things, but wanted to hide it. That’s what he would do, after all.

He glanced back over at his 3DS, lying on top of his blankets nearby.
For some reason, he wasn’t so much in the mood to kick Zoro’s ass anymore, at least not in-game.

Maybe a shower would make him feel less shitty.

The social services office wasn’t a very pleasant place, despite dealing with families and children for much of the time.

The waiting room in which Zoro and Robin were situated was pretty boring, with some ugly paintings on the wall of stupid landscapes, and framed black-and-white stock photos of little kids holding hands in the rain.

Zoro supposed they were meant to be sweet and inspirational, but to him, they just looked dumb. None of the kids that came in here were carefree enough to skip around in a real fucking thunderstorm. That was kind of already their life anyway.

There was a poor excuse for a play corner too, some books, one of those twisty wire contraptions that toddlers could slide wooden beads over, probably catch a disease from.

Zoro actually felt nervous sitting there, sunk low in his seat, unable to do anything save for stare blankly at the TV screen across the room, showing some program about animals.

Robin was beside him, answering some emails on her phone, well-manicured fingers tapping lightly on her screen.

The couple scheduled for the interview was late. By twenty minutes now. With no explanation. And Zoro wondered why.

Maybe it was something excusable. They’d gotten stuck in traffic, or gotten lost finding the office. Maybe they were on their way. That’s what Robin had tried to assure him of.

But the longer they sat there, the longer Zoro felt like something else had happened.

He felt like they’d been stood up. He’d been stood up. And this wasn’t something as stupid and pointless as a date…

He shifted uncomfortably, arms crossed over his chest, and he felt Robin looking over at him.

“Would you like a drink, Zoro?” she asked kindly. “I believe there’s a vending machine around the corner.”

Zoro just shook his head.

To a lot of people, he probably looked intimidating, or surly, sitting there with that furrow in his brow and his posture closed. But Robin wasn’t afraid to reach out and squeeze his shoulder comfortably.

He didn’t pull away, or scowl. The fact that she was there for him was helping, but it was still fucking torture to sit there, watching as the minutes ticked by on the square wooden clock mounted on the wall.

Twenty turned to thirty…..thirty to forty…..and that was when finally, a woman came out from behind the front desk and approached them.

“Ms. Nico? Zoro?” she said, and Zoro already had a feeling he knew what she was going to say before she’d even said it. “I’m afraid Mr. and Mrs. Silvers had to cancel.”
He was right. And he didn’t show any outward signs of disappointment. He wouldn’t let anyone see that, especially not some strange lady he didn’t know. She didn’t care about his situation.

“Is that so,” Robin replied beside him, and though her response was normal, Zoro knew her well enough to read the cold tone in her voice, the anger.

“Yes, I apologize for the long wait,” the woman said with a sympathetic smile, as if simply sitting here in this room was the worst of his problems.

“Is the second interview still to proceed as scheduled?” Robin asked challengingly, almost daring the woman to say otherwise.

“In a half hour, yes,” the woman confirmed. “So I suppose your waiting hasn’t all been for nothing~”

She chuckled, sounding pleased with herself, like she’d just remedied all their ill feelings with that simple statement.

Zoro felt silent dislike brew within him.

“I suppose not,” Robin replied, lips turning up into a tight smile that was more threatening than anything, clearly looking to dismiss her.

Something about Robin’s icy stare, those piercing blue eyes, seemed to off-put the woman, who tried to smile too and ultimately nodded hastily.

“If you need anything else until then, please ask,” she said, and backed off to head over to her desk once more.

After she’d crossed the room, scurrying past yet more chairs and slipped through the door that led to the administration area, Robin sighed and turned back to Zoro.

She didn’t say anything, but Zoro glanced up at her, met her eye, and they shared a moment of mutual understanding, of irritation, and yes, disappointment.

But she murmured, “How would you like to kill them?” and Zoro actually snorted out a laugh.

Robin smiled, glad he still could, even at a time like this.

Of course, it was much harder to do that when that next half hour rolled by, and the woman came up to them again, looking significantly more nervous this time.

She’d apologized profusely, told them that the second couple had canceled as well, and she didn’t know the reason.

And Zoro had watched as Robin simultaneously smiled and looked ready to snap the woman’s neck all at once.

She’d quickly ushered Zoro out of there with hardly another word, her hand on his back urging him out the door, and it wasn’t until they were back in the car, her driving considerably more aggressive, that she finally said anything.

“Forgive me if I seemed short with her, Zoro. But I was struggling to remain polite,” she said, still sounding tense.
“S’okay,” he mumbled in reply, resting an elbow on the little arm rest in the door and plopping his chin into his hand as he kept his gaze firmly fixed out the window.

There were another few moments of silence, during which he felt her stealing glances at him.

“Are you alright…?” she finally asked, to which he shrugged.

“No worse off than I was before,” he said.

It was true, but it still fucking hurt, and he wished it didn’t. He was normally content, and he was certainly a realistic person. He knew how the world worked, and he wasn’t the type to believe in miracles or fairy tales or shit.

But sometimes, almost against his will, his hopes did raise, and he didn’t like when that happened, because it meant they’d come crashing down in the most painful way.

He knew this was painful for Robin too. It had to be, judging by how she was reacting. She wanted nothing but the best for all of them, and maybe she wasn’t old enough to be his mother, but she was certainly the closest thing he had.

He heard her sigh heavily.

“I’m tempted to let you have a beer when we get home…” she admitted.

His head instantly whipped around in surprise, and though he’d just been thinking about his stupid crushed hopes, they weren’t so crushed anymore with that statement.

“Promise I won’t tell anyone,” he assured, the closest to pleading he’d ever allow himself to get.

Robin looked over at him, and her lips slowly turned up.

“I’ll stop at the liquor store~” she said.

The shower was simultaneously the best and worst place to be for Sanji when he was upset. He could cry if he needed to, wash away any trace of the tears afterward. It was private, but that was often a problem because it only brought him right back to thinking about things he didn’t want to think about.

He bitterly worked shampoo into his hair, glaring hard at the poofy orange loofah that was hanging from a hook on the toiletries rack underneath the shower nozzle.

It belonged to Nami, but right now, with his mind imagining the nice, patient couple that was probably talking to Zoro and Robin, he was pissed, and not even something that had rubbed all over her body could make him feel better.

His anger was turning inward though. He was angry with himself for how he was reacting to this.

He should be happy for Zoro. Everyone else was, including Nami. They’d all lived together for so long. They should support each other, and he should still support Zoro, even if they didn’t get along.

Ideally, he wanted every kid in a situation similar to his to get a family, because he knew it would make the world a better place.

But that wasn’t very realistic, was it, and it was foolish to think that anything any of them did could result in them getting what they wanted. It never had before, so why should it now?
He turned around to rinse his hair, hearing the muffled sounds of Luffy’s voice from out in the hallway, followed by what sounded like a stampede as he, Usopp, and Chopper no doubt rushed by in excitement over something.

Sanji wished he could be as carefree as them. Sometimes he could be, but when things got serious, he was quick to accept the emotional burden.

The blond finished up in the shower, wrapping a towel around his waist and spending another few minutes standing in front of the mirror, turning his face this way and that, trying to distract himself by searching for not-yet-existent facial hair.

Fingers combed through his wet hair, shaking it out a bit and then flopping it off to one side of his face as he’d done since he was little, looking to emulate his mother.

He remembered when she’d first styled his hair like that so they’d jokingly match. But as soon as she’d told him it actually looked cute, he’d wanted no other hairstyle.

The pounding of more running footsteps outside the door, and Chopper’s voice screeching, “Tag!” had Sanji pulling on boxers at least for the walk back to his room. He was uneager to have his towel ripped off and nudity exposed, if those guys were messing around out there.

He gathered the T-shirt and sweatpants he’d discarded atop the toilet seat, then cautiously opened the door, sticking his head out into the hallway and yanking it back quickly when Luffy went sprinting by.

Typical shit in the house though, and once the coast was clear, or at least relatively, he took the opportunity to hurry down the hall himself, back towards his bedroom.

He made it inside and was just about to shut the door, when suddenly, a thin hand caught it, and he found himself looking up (and up) at Mr. Brook’s tall form grinning down at him.

“Good morning, Sanji,” the man said, and Sanji wasn’t quite sure where the hell he’d even come from, his room clear at the other end of the hallway. Brook was often stealthy like that though, almost floating about the house like some kind of ghost.

“Morning,” Sanji replied. “Just gonna change.”

But Brook seemed to have no problem stopping him from closing the door, squeezing past Sanji with a pleasant question of, “Mind if I come in?”

“Yes, I mind!” Sanji screeched, throwing out arms in an attempt to stop him. “I’m not dressed!”

Brook merely chuckled though, entering the room anyway, and Sanji found himself immensely glad that he had put on boxers.

Still, he self-consciously tied his towel tighter around his waist and hurried to throw on his sweatpants at least, glaring at Brook all the while, enough that he nearly tumbled to the ground when his foot got caught in the pants leg in his haste.

He draped the damp towel over his desk chair, then crossed arms over his chest, quirking a brow at Brook expectantly as the man moseyed over to Zoro’s side of the room. He moved to straighten some of the other teen’s rumpled sheets before taking a seat on his bed.

“Miss Robin and Miss Nami saved a breakfast plate for you,” the old man said, crossing one long leg over the other and managing to sit with extremely good posture given his age. “I believe it’s in the
His fluffy afro, which gave him so much personality, was beginning to gray, and his dark skin was weathered, wrinkled from smiling as often as he did. But these were really the only indications to how damn old he was.

“I know,” Sanji replied, relaxing a bit now that it seemed Brook wasn’t going to pull anything perverted, which wasn’t unheard of. “Nami told me.”

Brook smiled and nodded, taking a look around the room. He hadn’t been in Zoro and Sanji’s room for a while, both of them far too old for bedtime stories or midnight closet monster prevention. He’d only been with them for two years, but it still filled him with wistful emotion from time to time, seeing how much they’d grown up before his eyes.

Whether Zoro or Sanji knew it or not, they were both role models for the younger kids, and Brook was proud of how each of them had matured, especially under the circumstances.

“I wonder how Mr. Zoro is doing~” the man mused, chuckling to himself when he noticed one of Zoro’s sweatshirts rolled up in a ball in lieu of a pillow…..which had actually fallen between Zoro’s desk and headboard.

The blond fell quiet, unable to hide the scowl that automatically came to his face. He didn’t say anything though, not in front of Mr. Brook. He wasn’t against showing his disdain for Zoro around the other kids, but in front of the adults, he usually tried to keep it together, this time to much worse effect.

Brook seemed to sense his upset, however, as the man turned his head to look at Sanji again, watching the blond for a long moment.

“Did I ever tell you why I made the decision to come here?” he asked, seemingly out of the blue, and thankfully, it was a random enough question to have Sanji’s features relax some, the blond lifting his gaze to Brook again.

Sanji shook his head, unsure of where Brook was going with this, but deciding to humor him.

Brook leaned back on a palm, looking at Sanji but seeing someone else, remembering someone else.

He remembered an even younger boy than Sanji, a stocky little fellow with a bald head and a blue baseball cap, always twisted backwards. The boy had huge, trusting eyes, and a smile that rivaled Luffy’s. In fact, Brook had always seen a lot of that boy in Luffy, and that was a big part of why he’d stayed.

“When I was a younger man, nearly fifty years ago, I met a young boy at a charity event,” he explained, reliving that moment in his head, a moment he wouldn’t forget, seeing the boy approach his band after the concert, awestruck as he asked for an autograph.

He’d asked if they’d known an old pirates’ tune, ‘Binks’ Sake’...

“The event was sponsoring youth programs---homes like this. It was an honor for my band to perform there. It was a cause we were all passionate about. And I remember seeing so many promising young folk like yourself.”

Brook’s smile turned fond as he watched Sanji, watched the blond’s expression soften a bit at the affectionate tone he used.
The way he spoke was almost melodic, certainly soothing, and whenever he told a story, it was hard to resist listening.

“Laboon was a boy like yourself,” Brook said. “He’d lost his family and was living under foster care but hadn’t found the right home yet. The Rumbar men and I showed him around backstage, grew rather attached to him in a short amount of time. We sent him letters from that point on, and whenever we played in his city, we always took him out. Mostly for ice cream~ I’m afraid he was much too young to accompany us to the strip club~”

The man trailed off with a chuckle, most likely lost in a memory Sanji didn’t much want to hear about from an *old* guy. But it was, nevertheless, surprising, to hear that Brook hadn’t merely come here on a whim, or because someone had forced him. He’d had a reason, that memory, to motivate him.

“Our friendship continued for a year or so,” Brook continued. “While we did our tour of the East, and it was strong enough that our lead singer---I’ve told you about Yorki---began seriously considering bringing the boy into his own home after the tour finished.”

Sanji swallowed, feeling a pain twist in his chest, because yes, he remembered Yorki. He remembered the stories Brook had told them about his band. How every last member had been friendly and kindhearted, talented as hell.

Brook always had fun tales to tell of them. They’d been full of life.

Until their tour bus had gotten into a terrible accident on the highway, leaving Brook as the lone survivor.

“What happened to the kid...?” Sanji risked asking, hoping that *this* story had a more positive spin.

But Brook’s smile actually grew.

“Well, we lost contact with him, ultimately, but years later, I was able to find out, thanks to the organization that sponsored the charity concert, that he’d been adopted. By a man named Crocus. I’m afraid I have no idea where he is now. But goodness, he must be in his fifties~”

The man laughed, shaking his head slightly, as if amazed by the passage of time. It was frightening, and thrilling all at once.

“Crocus, it turned out, was a doctor,” Brook explained softly, noting the intrigued look that had come over Sanji’s face. “He’d cared for Yorki before he passed in the hospital, following our accident. Apparently Yorki had told him about Laboon, and that was enough to spark the doctor’s interest. We can’t know what happened in between, but it must have been good if Crocus chose to adopt him~”

Sanji had taken a seat on his own bed, pulling up legs and picking at the ankles of his sweatpants.

Again, he felt mean, because why should he feel hopeful for the fate of a boy he’d never met, but not for *Zoro*?

Was he a mean person? Was that what his situation had caused him to become?

“My point,” Brook said, keeping Sanji from falling too far into that guilt again. “Is that good things can come from even the most tragic of circumstances. And good things often take patience.”

Sanji knew this, of course. But he’d been patient for so many years now, and nothing was
happening. Nothing was changing. Was it even okay to start hoping for more?

He sighed, knowing Brook was trying to help, and his words did mean a lot, especially on a day like today….but…

“What if I’m tired of waiting though…?” Sanji murmured. “What if I want to change things myself?”

He didn’t know if he could, but that didn’t stop him from wanting it.

Brook watched him from behind his circular glasses, admiring that determination that he recognized. He’d had the same feelings, after all, as a young musician wanting desperately to make it big…

“Well, then I’ll support you until the day I die,” he said seriously, though he broke out into a mischievous grin a second later. “Which may be tomorrow for all we know~ I am terribly old~”

A far too cheerful and contagious laugh followed, and despite everything, Sanji couldn’t help but crack a smile.

“Don’t say that,” he muttered between snickers, and he found himself wondering if he’d be as happy and content as Brook when he got to be that age.

Brook had lost so many important things, but he’d never lost his smile or his laugh, and it worked its magic, making Sanji feel stupid for ever feeling sorry for himself in the first place.

“Well, then I’ll support you until the day I die,” he said seriously, though he broke out into a mischievous grin a second later. “Which may be tomorrow for all we know~ I am terribly old~”

A far too cheerful and contagious laugh followed, and despite everything, Sanji couldn’t help but crack a smile.

“Don’t say that,” he muttered between snickers, and he found himself wondering if he’d be as happy and content as Brook when he got to be that age.

Brook had lost so many important things, but he’d never lost his smile or his laugh, and it worked its magic, making Sanji feel stupid for ever feeling sorry for himself in the first place.

“Will you ever try to meet him again?” Sanji asked after a minute, when his mirth had calmed down. “Laboon, I mean.”

Brook chuckled and gave a graceful shrug.

“I’d love to. More than anything. But I’m afraid I wouldn’t know where to start, an old skeleton like me~”

“How about the internet,” Sanji suggested with a smirk. “It’s really not so hard to track people down these days.”

Brook smiled, almost seemed a little stunned at Sanji’s confidence, as he’d honestly never entertained the option.

Meeting Laboon again….what would that be like…?

“Well,” Brook mused. “I suppose it would---”

Suddenly, the door to the bedroom swung open, interrupting him, a figure they hadn’t expected to see nearly walking in before he stopped short, noticing the two talking.

Zoro stood there, his hand still on the doorknob, eyes flicking between Brook, on his bed, and Sanji, across the room on his own, still wet and shirtless after his shower.

There was a beat of silence, all three of them surprised, but then Brook quickly stood with a smile.

“Ah, Zoro! I didn’t expect you’d be back so soon! Forgive me for using your bed as a perch. Sanji and I were just having a talk,” Brook chattered, then spread his arms in question. “But do tell us! How did it go?”

Brook stood there, grinning expectantly, as if Zoro would tell them all about it, how nice the couple had been, how they wanted to meet him again.
But Sanji could sense something was off.

The mosshead hadn’t said a word, and in fact, his gaze had drifted to Sanji, oddly, for a long moment, almost in fear of something.

Sanji had no idea what it could possibly be. Since when was Zoro afraid of anything? But the way his chest moved with his breathing, seemed to shudder as if from a lack of control….and the way he looked away eventually, averting eyes from both of them, almost shamefully.

“They didn’t show,” was all he said, words barely distinguishable beneath his mumbling, but Sanji heard him loud and clear. “Two interviews and neither of ‘em came…”

His eyes flitted to Sanji briefly again before he abruptly turned and left the room, the door swinging shut behind him.

Brook stood there in shock for a moment, but he reacted sooner than Sanji, quickly murmuring, “Excuse me, Sanji,” and rushing out the door after him, leaving the blond alone, still rather disbelieving of what he’d heard.

Sanji stared at the door, at the line of tape bisecting it, a strange feeling in his own chest.

It, surprisingly, wasn’t satisfaction.

No one had come for Zoro. He’d had not one, but two interviews scheduled, apparently? And neither had shown up? What kind of shitty luck---or shitty people---had been involved for both of them to fall through?

Sanji didn’t know, but the feeling he had, the bitterness of earlier, had subsided. He supposed it would be the true mark of an asshole if he kept wanting to kill him in his mind, if he picked up his 3DS again and rammed a weapon through his fictional heart for a third time.

He felt, dare he think it….bad, for the guy. He’d never been stood up for an interview himself, but he imagined it would sting an awful lot, even for an emotionless idiot like Zoro.

Hell, it would probably be devastating….

Fuck.

Sanji didn’t feel hungry. And he didn’t really want to go out of his room and hear what the others had to say about this matter just yet.

So he got to his feet, pulled on a clean T-shirt and left his sweatpants on to hop onto his bed once more, curling feet under him and leaning back against the wall.

He stared at the ceiling for a long time, at the dumb glow-in-the-dark stickers of tigers and sharks that were stuck all over Zoro’s half of the room. He’d wanted them so long ago, but had chipped the paint so bad when they’d tried to peel them off years later that, ultimately, he’d just left them.

Sanji had made fun of him when he’d first put them up, saying that tigers and sharks could never live together in the same habitat, but Zoro had just grumbled at him, insisting that maybe in some world they could.

It was a dumb memory, a dumb argument, one Sanji shook from his head in favor of grabbing his 3DS again and flipping it open.
He’d had enough of versus mode, he thought. Perhaps it was time he start the real story mode, though he found himself worrying, somewhat, about what the hell kind of story would unfold, especially considering the characters looked so much like him and his friends.

What kind of bleak drama would he be thrown into…? He hoped it was better than the one in real life.

Sanji flipped back through screens to the main menu, selecting the decorated banner that indicated the story.

He assumed he’d be thrown right in, unsure how exactly the game was going to work, but was a little surprised to find another question blink onto the dark screen.

‘Turn on permadeath?’ read the display.

He paused.

He’d played games that utilized the feature before. It meant his units would be gone forever should they perish in battle. The difficulty factor was cranked up several notches.

Still, usually, he preferred to play with it on, no matter how hard the game. It only made it that much more satisfying when he beat it.

So Sanji had no trouble answering, ‘Yes,’ as he had in the beginning.

After all, what was a game without any sort of challenge?
The royal family of Baratia is dead, as far as anyone knows. Sanjius knows his mother is, for certain. He’d only been four years old when she died, but he still has fuzzy memories, perhaps some of his first proper ones, of her.

His memory of her face has only been shaped by the painted portraits of her kind and serene smile that grace the castle’s walls, but he remembers, vaguely, her touch, the sweet flowery smell of her hair when she’d hug him close.

He can’t remember her voice, and he wishes he did. He knows he loved her, knows he adored her, and she him.

What Sanjius remembers, far more clearly, are his brothers.....and his father.

He remembers the pain, the bruises, remembers how he used to tremble in their presence. He remembers his brothers’ sneers, how they’d hit him, punch him, even at such a young age.

He remembers the way his father would ruffle their hair proudly, squeeze them close, but never him.

He remembers the dungeon.

And he remembers flashes of his older sister, her gentle touch and scolding tone when she tried to help patch him up, though she was still just a small child herself, risking abuse by coming to his aid secretly. She too had been close to their mother.

And now all of them are gone.

After the queen’s death nearly seventeen years ago, there had been a huge insurrection, by a coup that believed their beloved queen had been murdered. The hated king had fled, the prince had been told, possibly with the aid of magic, taking with him his three favored sons and his daughter.

Sanjius doesn’t know much about that night, save for the memory of that cold, dank cell he’d woken up in the next morning, alone. Until he felt soft hands touching his shoulder, heard a female voice telling him to hold still as another figure bent down and managed to, with some tools, pry off the iron helmet that obscured his entire face.

A young girl had been kneeling before him, in a dark purple cloak, her face dirty, but her eyes a clear piercing blue. An older teen, the man who’d removed his helmet, was beside her, blowing a mop of longer blue hair out of his face with a grin.

“Your Highness,” the girl had said with a smile and a reverent nod of her head, and ever since, things had changed.

Sir Francus and Robisia had lived in his kingdom all along, and he’d never known, never known that a weapons expert and healer of such skill resided just beyond the castle walls...

Now, it’s been a day since that castle became properly his. It’s been a day since Sanjius came of age, and it’s been a day since he received that summons from the mage---an offer from the neighboring kingdom of Whole Cakia---an offer of marriage.

“Your Highness?”
A familiar voice saying a familiar phrase floats through the stable, over the soft sighs of his horse, and the sound of the quick strokes of the brush he runs over her golden hide.

Siren dances in place in her stall, sensing another presence, her ears pricking to search for the source of the voice.

Sanjius can’t help but chuckle. Clearly, humans aren’t the only ones who have trouble locating Robisia half the time.

“In here~” he calls out, rubbing his hand soothingly over Siren’s shoulder.

He hears the dull thud of footsteps in the dirt outside that change tone when they hit the harder floor of the stable’s interior.

Soon, Robisia comes into view beside Siren’s stall, a smile on her face when the mare immediately sticks her head out through the open window into the aisle, nuzzling Robisia’s cloak until the woman produces a handful of sugar cubes.

She stretches out a palm, and Siren immediately snuffles them up, Robisia bringing hands up to stroke over her soft muzzle.

“You’re going to spoil her,” Sanjius says, patting a hand over Siren’s flank while he moves behind her to come up on her other side, joining his horse at the window.

“I’m not surprised to find you here, Your Highness. Going riding?” Robisia asks, fingers glowing briefly when they brush over a little nick on Siren’s nose, the mark instantly healing and the mare nickering her approval of the woman’s healing magic.

Sanjius brings a hand up to pet absently over his horse’s white-blond mane, playing with the delicate braids he’d twisted into the long hair earlier.

“She wants to get out, I can tell,” he replies. “The waves are gentle today. I think she’ll enjoy riding along the sand.”

Robisia nods sagely, smoothing out Siren’s forelock as she listens.

“I think she’ll also enjoy carrying you away from your responsibilities, Your Highness~”

Her eyes meet his knowingly, a mischievous glint there that hasn’t gone away since the day they met.

He looks at her for a long moment, then rolls his eyes a little and sighs, barely able to conceal the smirk that tugs at his lips.

“It will help me think,” he insists.

As if to prove his mind is made up, he nudges Siren towards the door and slides the heavy wood aside, untying her halter from one of the bars beside her stall window and leading her out into the aisle between the other stalls across the way.

There’s a breeze from the open doors on either end of the stable, and though there’s the natural, dusty scent of the horses, there is also the salt of the ocean in the air, and Siren scrapes a hoof along the ground impatiently when Sanjius secures her to a post so he can tack up.

“As if you’re still uncertain of your decision. You were given the princess’ portrait, were you not?” Robisia teases, smirking at the look he shoots back over his shoulder as he strides off down the aisle
“She was beautiful,” he calls over the sounds of another wooden door sliding open and some rummaging within a small tack room. “And I know it would be beneficial to unite our kingdoms. My only hesitance stems from the fact that I’ve never met her.”

More rummaging, and a short, “Oof,” before he adds, voice sounding a little strained from lifting something, “You’ve seen the way my father was painted. He looks like a god. Portraits tell nothing about a person’s true self.”

“Sound logic, Your Highness,” Robisia compliments, still petting Siren to keep her occupied until her owner comes out from around the corner, pale blue tunic and tan pants now covered in a fair amount of dust, his short ponytail a bit ruffled.

He can’t exactly brush hair from his eyes just yet though, carrying a stack of large pads to place beneath Siren’s saddle.

Robisia smiles, watching the prince plop the blue and white pads onto Siren’s back, each embroidered with the royal crest of Baratia, really the only sign that the man before her is royalty at all.

But it’s always been like that.

Sanjius has always been a prince of the people. After all, he was never treated like royalty to begin with, not under his father anyway.

He’s not king yet. He won’t be until his official coronation ceremony, which he’s chosen to postpone given the possibility of a wedding.

He hasn’t been able to govern officially, that duty left up to his advisors, of which Robisia is one, until yesterday, when the prince finally reached his twenty-first birthday. But the people have always respected him, cherished the prince for his kindness and his determination to make life easier for all of his citizens, even if it means helping to cook the meals in his own palace. He takes after his mother.

This is why Robisia isn’t surprised by the fact that, despite his efforts to appear conflicted, Prince Sanjius has most likely already decided to wed the foreign princess, for the betterment of his kingdom and hers.

During her musings, she watches the blond prince suit up his horse, position the saddle and tighten her girth before finally fitting her into her bridle, slipping the bit into her mouth as gently as can be so the metal doesn’t hurt her teeth.

“How long are you expecting this self-reflective ride to be?” Robisia asks. “I believe Sir Luffient is rather anxiously awaiting your answer about the journey~”

“Only because he wants to go on an adventure,” Sanjius mutters in reply as he begins to lead Siren out of the stable, Robisia falling into step beside them. “I won’t be long. Dinner preparations will begin soon anyway.”

He stops Siren outside the stable, throws the reins over her head, lowers his stirrups, then grabs ahold of the saddle, lifting his left foot and sliding it through the stirrup, hopping up and swinging his other leg over.

Siren stands perfectly still while he does, only prancing a tiny bit once he’s settled, adjusting to his
weight, though she’s entirely used to it.

“Perhaps you can locate Sir Zorin while you’re out,” Robisia suggests, giving one last pat to Siren’s neck before stepping back to give the mare space. “I believe he left on a short patrol…this morning~”

Sanjius bristles ever so slightly at the mention of the green-headed knight, though he doesn’t let it show.

“Wado knows the way home,” he justifies. “She’ll drag him back soon enough.”

“I saw him take Kitetsu…”

…Kitetsu.

Sanjius smacks a palm to his face, drags it down slowly at the mention of Zorin’s equally-challenged steed. The almost blood-red chestnut roan with a mind of his own that barely listens to even his master’s directions. Not to mention, that damned horse is notorious for biting unsuspecting stablehands.

“Wonderful,” Sanjius mutters, Siren sensing his discomfort and pawing the ground impatiently. “Provided he hasn’t ridden into the sea by now:”

Which wouldn’t be so bad. That’s where seaweed belongs anyhow.

But, because Robisia gives him an imploring look, he eventually sighs and nods. He may be the prince, but he’s certainly not above taking strong suggestions from his trusted friends.

“Very well…I’ll look,” he promises, and she looks pleased with this answer, cheerfully bidding farewell when he finally steers Siren away from the stable and canters off towards the shore.

What he neglects to tell her is that he knows the man will be fine.

It doesn’t matter how far he rides, if he ends up in the most barren, desolate place.

Zorin won’t die from the elements, nor of starvation.

The bastard won’t even die at all.

Sanji wasn’t expecting an open world design. Of course, his mobility in the game was slightly limited, but mostly by physics. He couldn’t, for example, scale the seaside cliffs that towered around the castle, at least not as the prince, his main playable character, who seemed to be merely human.

It was a little disappointing. Sanji thought about how cool it would be if his lookalike character had magical powers of some sort, but he supposed it would probably make him all the more badass in the end for kicking ass physically.

He’d come across Robin—or Robisia, he supposed—down at the stables, and though the game wasn’t giving him much direction yet, he had a feeling his next task was to round up the rest of his friends, who might have been scattered around the castle grounds.

Luckily, taking a horse was much faster, though he still wasn’t so sure he ever wanted to involve Zoro’s character again, even at Robisia’s request.

He’d been riding the horse off across the field towards the shore when there was a knock at his
bedroom door, followed by Robin’s voice.

“Sanji?” she called quietly, and he shut his 3DS.

“Yeah?” he replied, and that was when the doorknob turned gently and the older woman stepped in, still dressed in her suit from earlier.

A worried gaze flicked to Zoro’s side of the room, then she sighed.

“Not here…” she murmured, almost to herself. “Though I suppose I’m not surprised…”

Sanji sat on his bed, a little uncomfortably. He really didn’t want to talk about Zoro, or whatever had happened to him that morning at the social services office.

“He tried to come in, but then left,” he offered at least. “Brook went after him.”

“We’re not sure where he ran off to,” Robin replied, crossing arms over her chest somewhat anxiously. “But I have to assume he wanted to be alone.”

Sanji said nothing, just shrugged unhelpfully, averting his gaze when she turned hers to him.

He didn’t want to seem uncaring of Zoro’s plight in front of Robin, but dammit, it was hard not to. Even if he did feel a little bad for the guy, he wasn’t about to gush about it, which no doubt made him look like a total jerk in Robin’s eyes.

“Would you mind helping us look for him?” she eventually asked after a long moment, and though she posed it as a question, there was a seriousness in her eyes that urged him to comply. Clearly, she was worried.

Something about her request had him furrow his brow, thinking about how similar it was to the one her character had asked in-game.

But he shook it off, ultimately deciding to agree, though he doubted he’d have any luck if the guy had gone and gotten himself hopelessly lost.

“Oh…” he muttered, pushing up off the bed. “Lemme just get dressed.”

She nodded her thanks, then slipped out of the room.

Sanji threw on jeans and a casual polo shirt, finally grabbed a bite to eat in the kitchen, and moseyed his way to the garage to get his bike, taking his sweet time.

Most of the others had been preoccupied, discussing where they should look and trying to form a plan. The idiot hadn’t taken his phone, so it was probably hopeless anyway. Sanji would do just as well wandering himself.

He’d ride around for a while, pretend he’d looked, then come back empty-handed, and who could fault him?

So he grabbed his small backpack from the hook near the door, stuffed in his wallet, phone, and 3DS, just in case he was gone a while, and started off riding down the driveway and onto the street, noting as he left that Zoro’s dumb skateboard was missing too.

He didn’t know why everyone was so worried, even after what had happened. It was like Robin said. Zoro probably wanted to be alone, so he’d gone off and that was that. No big deal.
Even if they didn’t like to let him go places by himself thanks to his terrible sense of direction, it wasn’t like he was going to die or anything.

It was a nice day, and it was probably a good thing he’d gotten out of the house. The events of that morning, not to mention his new game, had kept him holed up in his room far more than usual.

The ride was nice, despite its original purpose, and it afforded him the chance to forget about all this damn drama and the homework he knew he had to finish that night. Instead, all he had to think about was the warm breeze in his face and the satisfying crackle of the asphalt under his bike tires, tiny bubbles popping up now and again thanks to the increasing heat of the day.

He didn’t really have a set destination in mind, just found himself riding down through the rows of privately-owned beach houses. He liked this area, because most of the owners didn’t live here year-round, and thus, it was very quiet in the spring. The road was flat, and the houses sat unoccupied high above him on their stilts, save for the stray seagull that hopped along the little boardwalks connecting the beachside houses to the sand.

He rode until he reached the fishermen’s pier, also largely empty with it being the off-season.

Sanji parked his bike outside the small, weathered tackle shop at the end of the pier and strode in, pleased with the blast of air conditioning that hit him when he opened the door.

He weaved his way through claustrophobic rows of bait and fancy fishing gear that was beyond his comprehension, making his way straight to the other side of the store where the ice cream freezers were located. It wasn’t often that he indulged himself with too many sweets, but staring at the selection of frozen treats within certainly made his mouth water.

He slid open the clear window at the top, reached into the cold box to pull out a chocolate-covered ice cream bar, then fished his wallet from his backpack and headed back to the middle of the store for the register.

“Sanji~” the aging man behind the counter, nearly obscured by the countless lures that hung down in jumbles from the low ceiling above, said as he approached, pushing aside a long string of hanging googly-eyed blowfish to grin at the blond. “Been a while since I last saw you, kiddo~”

“Hey, Den,” Sanji replied, sliding his ice cream over the glass counter and the waterproof watches inside the case. “Sorry. Finals are coming up. Haven’t been able to get out as much.”

“It’s alright. That’s the way life goes,” Den chuckled, his curly mess of white hair sticking out every which way from beneath his large bucket hat. “How’s Franky doing?”

“Same old,” Sanji replied, watching as Den punched a few numbers into the old-fashioned cash register, then onto a calculator, eventually flipping the device around to show Sanji his total. “We were fixing up the treehouse with him yesterday.”

Den laughed, taking the bill Sanji tossed his way and pulling out a few coins from the drawer for his change.

“I remember when he was plannin’ that thing for you kids. He came to me all in a twist about what kind of sealant to use on the wood~ And in the end, he went with his first choice anyway~”

“Well, Franky knows what he’s doing,” Sanji replied, sticking the coins into his pocket and sliding the ice cream back towards him.

But he supposed, so did Den. He used to be a shipwright in his younger days, and he knew Franky
valued his opinion and expertise, as well as his friendship. Den was the brother of Franky’s former boss, Tom, back when he was an apprentice builder. And he knew how close Franky and Tom had been before he’d passed away…

“Ask him if he knows anything about the big cruise ship they’re talkin’ ‘bout buildin’ over at Galley-La,” Den suggested, fiddling with the old radio next to him on the counter, seeing as the previous channel had started to play too many commercials. “Heard they still haven’t decided on a designer.”

“Sounds cool. Yeah, I’ll ask him,” Sanji assured, then gave a wave as he backed away from the counter and headed out through the opposite door from which he’d come.

This door led out onto the start of the long pier that stretched out far over the ocean in front of him, narrowing to a slim point at the end, from his perspective. A few fishermen dotted the edges, fishing poles secured in the holders and coolers full of bait beside them as they waited for a bite.

There were benches at the end of the pier, and while they looked inviting, and there was a nice breeze that picked up, he was opting for shade with how easily his fair skin burned in the sun. So he strode across the sand-covered planks, feeling the wood creak slightly beneath his feet. He turned and headed down the small flight of stairs that led to the sandy beach below, stopping to take off his shoes and socks.

From there, he treaded across the warm beach, loving the feeling of the grains beneath his toes, the smooth sponginess of the wet sand when he approached the water.

The beach was also pretty empty that day, one man walking with his dog a few hundred yards away, and a pair of women sunbathing on colorful towels, but that was it, aside from the fishermen, and Sanji felt entirely relaxed and alone when he plunked himself down onto the cool sand beneath the shade of the pier.

The waves lapped gently, and he didn’t much care if he got sand on his jeans. They were older, and he’d worn them for this purpose anyway.

He took off his backpack, rolled up his pants a few turns over his ankles and pulled up his knees, settling in to open his ice cream and crunch down into the thin chocolate.

The flavor surprised him though, and he looked down, not expecting to see the light green of mint-flavored ice cream within.

Confused, he un-crinkled the wrapper a bit, noticing with a slight groan that he’d indeed bought mint chocolate chip without having noticed.

It wasn’t that he didn’t like it….he just….didn’t really understand why it was so popular.

But, better than pistachio, he thought.

He wouldn’t waste it, of course, so he chomped off another bite, catching a drip of ice cream with his thumb and licking it off, eyes drifting up the barnacle-encrusted wooden beams that towered above him, lined like soldiers into the water, along the length of the pier.

He watched the waves crash up over them, the birds that had gathered on one of the many lateral supports, and the owlish pair of eyes that stared back at him from---

Sanji nearly dropped his ice cream in the fucking sand, thumb still sheepishly in his mouth when he noticed none other than the fucking mosshead perched on one of the lower beams that crossed over the shallows of the water.
The idiot was sitting there on the beam, leaned up against one of the vertical pillars like some fucking hillbilly on a fence, holding a handful of rocks in one hand that he’d apparently been plunking into the water below, with what looked like a goddamn beer bottle nestled in his lap. He’d been concealed from Sanji’s vantage point when he’d first approached, but now that Sanji sat, he could see the stupid bumpkin clear as day. He also finally noticed his damn nasty shoes and the grungy skateboard on the edge of the water.

The two stared at each other for a long moment, both seemingly just as shocked to see the other.

But it was Sanji who reacted first, rolling his eyes and resisting the urge to smack his forehead.

“You know everyone’s looking for you!” he called out to Zoro, not moving from his spot on the sand, and it seemed Zoro wasn’t moving either, the brute even relaxing a little, taking a swig from that fucking bottle which was definitely alcohol—Sanji was positive.

Zoro merely shrugged, said nothing, and tilted his head back against the mast-like structure behind him, closing his eyes.

The blond glared at him, glad for their distance, but it was still a damn pain to have discovered the fool ruining his peace.

He let him sit there, unwilling to converse any further, and went back to sulkily eating his ice cream before it melted.

It was much less pleasant now though, knowing Zoro was sitting nearby, so he finally reached into his backpack and pulled out his 3DS, eager to distract himself.

He finished off the popsicle in a few bites and chewed absently on the stick while he flipped open the device.

It wasn’t much of an escape though, considering who he was supposed to be looking for in-game.

---

*Siren’s hooves pound along the damp sand, kicking up clumps and leaving a trail of hoofprint depressions behind as she canters along.*

*Sanjius is relaxed as he rides, knowing the pace of her stride exactly, able to settle into the saddle and almost move with her thanks to so many years of riding. He loosen his grip on the reins, and Siren seems to appreciate this, picking up speed a bit and giving a free toss of her head as she enjoys the run.*

*The castle towers behind him, atop the high cliff, always a beacon for incoming ships. Particularly since his father disappeared, Baratia has been a kingdom with open borders, welcoming trade from all over the world. In a way, it’s become a place where all oceans of the world meet, and Sanjius always remembers being far more interested in the sailors’ stories than his studies.*

*That wasn’t to say the scholars from Oharia, the kingdom from which Robisia emigrated, didn’t have interesting stories. They were just…..rather boring storytellers, and that trait carried over into their teaching style as well. He’d much preferred when Robisia tutored him.*

*His kingdom is full of immigrants, a melting pot from other kingdoms, and he loves it. In fact, none of his knights are strictly from Baratia. Sir Usio and Sir Luffient are the closest, having lived farther inland in the countryside, but Sir Francus and Sir Chonrad both hail from different lands.*

*His best tactician and psychic, Namilia, came here when she was very young, and even his*
gentleman-in-waiting, Brokard, is not a Baratian by blood.

Of course, all of these people had come into his life after his father’s disappearance, something that is good, considering how much his father valued purity of blood....

Sanjius quickly shakes thoughts of his father from his mind, focusing instead on the open stretch of sand before him and the way the beach curves around the bend of the cliffs up ahead.

Siren nears the turn, and she slows, prancing a bit at the edge of the water, almost admiring the view herself, the towering crags that rise from the water, some adorned with small trees swaying in the wind.

Sanjius loves riding here, loves feeling small amidst nature’s formations, loves feeling entirely free and alone...

Suddenly, Siren’s ears prick up, and she turns her head, looking around the bend to a grassy hill that slopes gently up beside the cliff.

There is another horse, fully saddled, grazing quietly, a familiar red-splattered chestnut standing out among the greens.

Kitetsu looks up too with a curious nicker, then seems to take no further interest and goes back down to his grazing.

The grass is tall, but when Sanjius looks closer, he notices something else growing in the plain. Or at least, it fits right in---that green tuft of hair that becomes visible when the grass ripples in the wind, the dark pants, a black boot crossed over a knee like some kind of ugly tree stump. Nature at its finest.

Unfortunately, it seems Sir Zorin has intruded upon the prince’s special spot, and that in itself should be a damned crime. Not to mention, he hardly seems to be patrolling---most likely sleeping, if Sanjius knows anything about the brute.

He’s not sure why, because he doesn’t want to, but he finds himself steering Siren reluctantly over, keeping her at an easy trot until he stops her in front of the hill, finally able to properly see the mosshead-shaped depression in the long grass that pokes out from the sand dunes.

“I wasn’t aware this was a day of rest!” he calls out loudly, and insistently.

There’s no way Zorin doesn’t know it’s him, but there’s no reaction right away, even for his prince. The delay is so long that Sanjius has to clear his throat loudly before there’s any movement at all.

But eventually, he sees Zorin’s form twitch. Then a mossy head slowly pokes up, fixing him with a bleary one-eyed stare. A loud, obnoxious yawn, and he sits up enough to stretch ridiculously before bringing that stare right back to the prince.

Sanjius scoffs. He doesn’t expect groveling or excessive shows of respect, despite being royalty. But damn it all, as a person he expects at least a polite greeting instead of the way the fool mutely stares at him in the same way he’d stare at kitchen utensils, gaze dull and uninterested.

For a long minute, Sanjius actually thinks the idiot isn’t going to say anything.

But then, finally, as if he’d only just heard the prince, Zorin mumbles, “Why aren’t you off planning your wedding?”
Sanjius rolls his eyes hard, noting the way that even Zorin’s horse looks smug when he casually looks up and gives a particularly proud toss of his head, pawing the ground lightly.

“Because I have to round up you lot if I’m to begin the journey to Whole Cakia tomorrow!” he justifies, this time with adamance.

Zorin’s gaze sharpens after that statement though. He sits up straighter and furrows his brow.

“Seriously…?” he asks, sounding genuinely surprised by the prince’s answer.

But Sanjius has no patience for him right now, so he replies curtly, “Of course. It will be advantageous to both of our kingdoms. And sooner or later, an heir will be necessary. It will be my duty as king.”

He says it all methodically, almost to convince himself that this is the right decision.

But Zorin doesn’t help matters when he mutters, “You don’t even know her though…”

If Sanjius didn’t know better, he’d think Zorin sounded disappointed, but it’s probably just disgust or annoyance. Nevermind that Zorin’s just voiced the same concerns he had earlier. He won’t be caught dead agreeing with the knight.

“And she doesn’t know me. But she’s a princess, and she must know her duty as well. I’m entering into this with an open mind,” he justifies. “Besides. She could be my soulmate.”

“Oh she could be a witch…” Zorin adds under his breath, and Sanjius decides he’s had enough.

“I have better things to be doing than listening to your stupid negativity all day,” Sanjius shoots back, pulling Siren’s reins gently when she dances impatiently in place. “I want to talk to all of you, so get off your lazy ass and follow me back to the castle. I’ll make it an order if I have to.”

He knows that Zorin, despite all his complaints, is the type to listen to them.

Sir Luffient may be younger than him, but seeing as the nineteen-year-old is the head of the royal guard, Zorin is always respectful of him.

And as for Sanjius, well….if the prince orders him to do something, he’ll still do it, no matter how reluctantly. It’s one of the few things Sanjius can appreciate about the man.

Zorin stares at him with an intensity and a barely-masked displeasure that, while it’s not an uncommon look to see on the knight’s face, seems different this time. He seems more deeply troubled, almost like Sanjius’ decision affects him personally somehow.

But it’s gone as soon as it appeared, and Zorin is getting to his feet slowly, reattaching his three swords to the weapons belt around his hip, which he’s surprisingly adept with, considering how cumbersome they are.

He walks over to Kitetsu, who promptly turns away with an ornery flick of his head, but a stern look from Zorin seems to get the horse back in line, if only enough for him to grab the reins.

He tugs the insolent stallion closer and mutters a few words of warning in the horse’s ear, as if he understands human language.

Then he moves to Kitetsu’s side and swings up into the saddle. He sits there, glowering at Sanjius again and waiting for him to do as he’d said.
“Lead the way, Your Highness,” he grumbles, a sarcastic edge to his voice that has the prince scowling anew.

But he supposes he should be glad that the man even listened to him without much of a fight, so he gently pulls Siren around and directs her back towards the castle.

His ride has been cut disappointingly short, and though he could just leave the guy here, he’s not too keen on coming back out later in the night just to locate the knight’s wandering ass.

It’s now or never.

He gives a gentle nudge to Siren’s sides with heels and she takes off again at a fast canter down the beach.

The thunder of Kitetsu’s hooves follows behind.

The diplomatic talks the prince has with his knights and advisors aren’t always a formal affair. There’s no round table, no stuffy discussion amongst old men who haven’t seen battle in years.

No, they are often chaotic, and ill-planned, but that’s kind of the way Sanjius likes it. Baratia is mostly a defensive kingdom anyway. There hasn’t been any conquering of other territories since his father’s days as king, and Sanjius will enter upon his own reign during a time of great peace and prosperity for the kingdom’s subjects.

He’s not much the type to want glory, but it is pretty comforting to know that, so far, the history books will be recording nothing but good things about him.

But, of course, there’s no way they’ll catch all the details, particularly the way he and his closest confidants are now scattered casually about his rather lavish parlor after dinner, hardly looking ready to seriously discuss anything, let alone politics.

Luffient is draped over a couch, talking with Usio about a mysterious beetle they saw that morning on their patrol, possibly containing magical properties.

Chonrad, the youngest of the bunch, only just fully knighted a few months ago, is listening with wide, excited eyes, expressing how much he wished he hadn’t been working with the apothecary at the time. Not that he’d give up his medical practice for anything. The fact that he can save lives in combat and hospital is why he’s such a huge asset to the royal guard.

Francus is leaning up against the doorframe, talking to Brokard about the minstrel troupe that had performed at the prince’s banquet—namely about how they could have done better.

Seated more regally than even the prince himself, across the room, Namilia and Robisia are conversing about the weather patterns. Namilia is using a dash of her foresight power to try and predict the conditions for potential travel to Whole Cakia, fingers pressed delicately to her temples, her eyes closed.

Sanjius strides across the room to kick Zorin awake, the idiot having made himself comfortable on the floor of all places, against the wall just inside the door.

The prince deems it time to start this little meeting of sorts. Or rather, to see how long he can keep everyone’s attention. He might, by blood, have the most authority, but when it comes to this group, he falls several short of the job of “leader.”
And yet, all he has to do is stand on the edge of the room, near the ornate stone fireplace in view of everyone.

He says, “I think you all know why I called you here,” and it’s more than enough to grab everyone’s attention.

The chatter stops, and his friends all turn to look at him, even Luffient, who sits up and crosses legs beneath him on the couch. It seems, for a moment, that he has their quiet focus.

But it takes Luffient all of a second before he bounces excitedly and screeches, “So we’re going to Whole Cakia?”

Sanjius opens his mouth indignantly….but eventually decides that, yes, that pretty much covers it, so he simply nods, ready for the eruption of excitement that follows.

Usio immediately begins detailing just how well he’s going to protect everyone with the warrior’s prowess of a ferocious lion, impressing Chonrad immensely.

Brokard declares he’ll guard the prince with his life, and Francus eagerly jumps into weapon planning. Robisia and Namilia go right back to their earlier discussion, both having been certain already of the prince’s decision.

The only one that doesn’t begin talk of preparations is Zorin, who, in fact, is still flopped there with his hands behind his head, eyes closed. He could be sleeping if it weren’t for that deep furrow in his brow, the frown on his face that is far too tense for unconsciousness.

Sanjius glances at him, perturbed with the lack of support the knight is showing. He has to trust his traveling companions, has to know they will back him up no matter what, even if he himself is also trained in combat.

But to think of any of them expressing hesitance….it’s no good for a journey as harrowing as the one to Whole Cakia.

He waits, wondering if the brute will say anything, do anything, especially when Namilia starts taking charge, deciding what time they should leave, who will act as regent during Sanjius’ absence.

Most of them agree that it has to be Sir Smophokles, the grumpy, but fair, appointed head of civilian defense. He’s tried to have Luffient thrown in the dungeon more times than they can count thanks to his constant abandonment of payment at pubs, but he’s trustworthy, and the people respect him.

Still, Zorin offers no input, positive or negative, and Sanjius can’t take it.

He doesn’t know why it’s getting to him so much, and he doesn’t know why, when they all begin to disperse for the evening to ready their preparations for the morning, he’s following Zorin out of the parlor, instead of retreating to his room.

Brokard is talking to Zorin about something ahead of him, perhaps asking him to retrieve a few choices of sabers from the weapons vault as they walk along the blue carpet down the long hallway.

Sanjius is planning what he wants to say to the bastard, especially as they near the grand staircase, where the hallway will split and continue to the servants’ quarters in the west wing. He knows Brokard will retire there, and Zorin will leave the castle to first tend to the horses, then probably go to his own quarters in the smaller houses where many of the knights and advisors reside just beyond the castle walls.
Sanjius, admittedly, hasn’t been inside any of them, but he’s damned willing to kick down Zorin’s door if he has to in order to give the man a piece of his mind.

He’s ready, after all, to deny the man’s accompaniment on the journey, despite his strength. If Zorin isn’t fully committed, then he has no business going along.

They near the top of the staircase in the middle of the towering entrance hall, their forms tiny compared to the massive white pillars that rise several stories, breaking up the visible hallways of the upper floors that circle above. The faces of his ancestors stare down from portraits that line the hall, his own standing tall at the landing of the stairs.

He remembers how terribly boring (and slightly painful) it had been to stand for so long while the artist, Lady Goldennui, worked for hours upon hours. The finished painting is proud, stylish, but also lonely, compared to the full families that adorn the walls elsewhere, and he ignores it, catching up to Zorin and Brokard with determination.

“Sir Zorin---!” he starts to say.

The other two have just barely turned around when, suddenly, there’s the faintest of whistles, and Sanjius notices, just a little too late, the arrow shooting across the grand hall, seemingly out of nowhere.

Just a little too late he notices that it’s heading straight towards him.

His eyes are wide, and Zorin seems to move in slow motion when he darts in front of Sanjius, slashes out with a sword, slicing the arrow in two and sending the broken pieces thudding to the carpeted steps below.

Sanjius barely has time to wonder what on Earth is happening, before, this time, the whistling sound is multiplied tenfold, and he sees a shower of arrows raining out from the surrounding balconies, just before their owners seem to materialize out of nothing, identical cloaked archers, no doubt under some sort of invisibility spell.

Zorin is shoving him off towards the east wing again urgently, sword still drawn, his body shielding the prince.

Brokard has pulled the crook off his decorative cane and drawn out the saber that dwells within the casing, slicing away more arrows.

“Sir Zorin! Take the prince!” he’s calling out, and Sanjius instantly protests, fighting against Zorin, who tries to wrestle him back through the large doors to the east wing with more vigor.

“No!” he cries, but Zorin’s brute force is too strong and determined. “You can’t---! There’s too many! Zorin, you damned----let me go!”

But Zorin presses forward and manages to get him back to the doors, though the knight hisses in pain when a near-flying arrow nicks his arm and draws blood.

Brokard turns to him, still standing bravely at the top of the stairs with his saber raised.

“Your Highness,” he says calmly. “If I die for you, it will be an honor.”

Sanjius splutters, trying for one last effort to be free from the knight’s grasp.

“What the hell are you saying, Brok----!”
A single arrow sails straight into Brokard’s chest, hitting him right below his ruffled collar.

He doesn’t make a sound, and neither does Sanjius, his mouth merely dropping open without words, an arm outstretched fruitlessly, Zorin practically knocking him over now with how hard he’s pushing his body into the blond’s.

That one arrow hits, almost poetically, and Brokard doesn’t move. He keeps standing there, just as tall and proud as the prince’s portrait.

But then, the dull sound of a second arrow hitting, this one protruding from his stomach, and then a third, close to the first.

Zorin tenses, hearing that sound behind him, and his eyes flash painfully.

He knows what’s happened.

But he doesn’t look back, and this time, it’s significantly easier to move the prince because the blond merely stumbles backwards in shock, Zorin pushing him through the doors and letting them slam shut, thunderously loud, behind them.

The last thing the prince sees is Brokard falling gracefully backwards, a strange purple mist twirling out from the three arrows embedded in his torso.

After that, he remembers screaming, but not much else.

“Fuck!”

Zoro’s eyes shot open, that forceful exclamation from over on the sand snapping him out of his light dozing and nearly sending him plummeting off the beam he’d settled himself on, into the water below.

He reeled a bit, had to flail arms and grab the pillar behind him to catch his balance, hugging it rather comically as he gathered his bearings.

He’d forgotten where he was, frankly. Sanji had shown up, and that had been a fucking shock, but once the blond settled into his game, Zoro had tried to relax once more, tried not to wonder how or why Sanji had shown up here of all places.

It certainly wasn’t on purpose. Like the blond had come looking for him. No way. And Zoro had wanted to be alone anyway, so he’d been thankful Sanji didn’t converse with him, didn’t even ask about what had gone down that day.

Until the dumb blond decided he wanted to scream, that is…

“The hell’re you yellin’ about?” Zoro called out to him, flustered and still a little disoriented, letting go of the beam and checking to make sure he hadn’t lost the precious half-empty beer bottle in his lap. He hadn’t.

“Shut up!” Sanji screeched back, furiously button mashing his 3DS as if trying to remedy something. “I just lost Broo----oh forget it, it’s none of your business!”

“It is if you’re disturbing the fucking peace!” Zoro justified irritably.

Sanji ignored him, gaze still glued to his screen, popsicle stick jutting out of his mouth ridiculously.
Zoro glared at him, wishing the blond had kept arguing. He hated when Sanji did that---just fucking dropped everything without warning.

Maybe it was stupid, but he actually liked arguing with Sanji. Sanji was the only person he knew who could challenge him properly, fight back with just as much fervor. But lately, especially, Sanji wouldn’t even fight him, wouldn’t rise to the bait. He’d just roll his eyes and fall silent, as if not interacting with Zoro period was a better option.

And Zoro had to admit that it was starting to hurt more than any insult the blond could throw his way.

It made him feel worthless and forgotten, if the one person who reminded him most of the time in his life when he had belonged somewhere wouldn’t even give him the time of day.

Not to mention, after getting stood up just that morning, his self esteem had taken a blow, even if he tried to feign strength and pretend otherwise.

This was not what he needed right now, and he was too pissed to let it slide. Or maybe too buzzed...but he didn’t get drunk, so it must have been the former.

With a huff, he swiveled on the beam and hopped off to land knee-deep in the water below. He’d rolled up his jeans, but they still got a little wet. Not that he cared because he had other things on his mind as he stomped over to his shoes and picked them up along with his skateboard before stalking over to Sanji.

“Why the fuck do you gotta be a dick to me, huh?” he demanded, and he realized he didn’t just mean right now, but always.

He felt a stupid pang in his chest when it took Sanji a full five seconds before he finally looked up at him balefully.

“You’re the one yelling at me,” Sanji muttered calmly, but with a subtle hike of a brow that was almost a challenge, as if to ask if Zoro really wanted to start something here.

“I just thought---” he started, but stopped short again, trying to make an argument work in his mouth. It was difficult, though, with Sanji staring at him expectantly, waiting for him to say something, clearly skeptical with Zoro’s ability to come up with anything.

“I just---” Zoro tried again.

He just wanted this to end, was what he wanted. He wanted to take back the actions of his younger self. Maybe then, things wouldn’t be like this.

Zoro sighed heavily and looked off down the beach, shoulders slumping in defeat.

“I just thought that---after this morning---I dunno, that maybe you’d be more understanding....” he mumbled, already feeling foolish for having said that. “But I guess not...”
He heard Sanji’s scoff, and the snap of his 3DS as he closed it, followed by the zipper of his backpack.

“Oh, what, are you expecting pity?” Sanji grumbled. “‘Cause you’re not gonna get it from me. The world sucks, mosshead. People suck. Thought you, out of everyone, would know that.”

Zoro let out a forceful breath.

Of course he knew that. He didn’t want Sanji’s pity. He knew what happened to him that morning was nothing that could have been avoided, but...

Zoro clenched his jaw, because what he wished was that he hadn’t assumed Sanji would act differently. He wished that---when Sanji saw him but left him in peace without any snarky remarks---that he hadn’t gotten his hopes up. Hadn’t thought maybe Sanji was starting to get it.

He’d been wrong, hadn’t he. He shouldn’t have said anything.

“People do suck…” Zoro muttered pointedly in reply, then strode off back towards the sunlit stretch of beach, making sure to kick up sand while he went.

He kept walking for a full ten seconds or so, skateboard shoved under his arm and his shoes in one hand, eager to put the blond far behind him.

And he hated how his mind played a dumb scenario, one that involved Sanji running after him and apologizing, maybe trying to be a little civil with him.

But of course it didn’t happen.

All that did happen was Sanji yelling out, “Home’s that way, idiot!”

Zoro bristled, sparing a glance behind him to see that Sanji had already packed up his things and started to head in the opposite direction, not even waiting for Zoro to turn around.

“Who says I was going back to Sunny!” Zoro shot back automatically, knowing his words weren’t true.

He didn’t want to give Sanji any sort of satisfaction though, even if it seemed the other teen had decided he wouldn’t be paying him any further mind.

So he waited until Sanji was nearly out of sight, having circled back out from under the pier, towards the tackle shop, to finally trudge after him.

For some reason, he was almost more upset with this encounter than he’d been about his morning at the social services office.

Sanji was clearly trying to lose him by the time Zoro found his way out to the road, the blond already speeding off on his bike, several houses away.

He watched him go with a listless gaze, unsure of why he was even going to follow him. He could just as easily go back and sit under the pier again.

But his skateboard hit the ground, and he stepped up onto it, kicking off to get himself rolling down the street behind the disappearing blond speck.

He still had the beer in hand, and he wasn’t cautious about taking another swig as he rode. There
were no cops around, no one to stop him on the empty streets, and all he had to do was tuck it out of sight when the occasional car drove past.

Eventually, he finished it anyway, and tossed it into a recycling bin outside a convenience store, not even needing to stop.

With the lingering taste of beer in his mouth, he tried to clear his mind, decided to see how many parked cars he could tap when he cruised up onto the sidewalk beside a long line.

One…..two…..three….

He managed seven before a lamppost interrupted his flow, so he set to riding normally again after swerving around it.

Skateboarding was something Kuina had taught him. Or rather, they’d learned it together, mostly because Koshiro had thought they’d needed an outlet when they broke too many things in the house, play-wrestling.

He’d been a little too rough when he was younger, in the foster system for as long as he could remember. He only knew that his birth parents were dead. Both overdosed when he was but a year old, and he’d stayed with several different families before coming to Sunny.

Apparently, the first had nearly adopted him, but somehow it fell through, leaving him to be passed around until he arrived at Koshiro’s when he was seven.

Three years he’d lived with the widowed man and his daughter. Three years, during which he’d assumed that was it, finally, and it probably would have been.

But then, an unsuspecting day, just like this. A tumble down the stairs. He’d poked his head out of his room to the sound of shouting, and soon, sirens. The first time he’d ever worn a suit was to Kuina’s funeral, a suit that hadn’t even belonged to him, but to his social worker’s young nephew.

Maybe if he’d cried during it, Koshiro would’ve kept him. He wondered this from time to time.

Maybe if his emotions hadn’t shut down on him, Koshiro would have sympathized and let him stay, even without Kuina.

But instead, he’d been brought here, and though he’d done some serious healing over the past six years, the one bruise that refused to, that had persisted since those darker times in his life, was still throbbing in his chest the longer he watched Sanji’s back.

It seemed it was going to be harder than he thought to rid himself of disappointment or negativity today.

Perhaps it was better to just accept it.

Zoro lost sight of Sanji eventually, the blond rounding a bend, and as soon as he did, Zoro began to drift off course, ending up on another street entirely, this one a few house rows inland from the beach.

The asphalt wasn’t as smooth, so he slowed and hopped off his skateboard entirely in favor of walking for a bit, absently reading the names of the beach houses as he went.

Some of them were normal, and kind of made sense. Names that had to do with the ocean or tropical getaways.
But then there were the strange ones, weird-ass weathered signs nailed beneath the stilt-lifted houses that were otherwise unassuming.

Zoro didn’t know who the fuck wanted to take home precious family vacation memories from the ‘Sexy Foxy’ or the ‘Sleeping White Horse of the Forest’.

‘Coffin Boat’ was pretty cool though, he could admit, like some omen of death.

That was actually where he found someone he wasn’t expecting, crouched on the sidewalk in front of that house, poking eagerly at a tuft of grass that was growing out of one of the cracks.

Zoro paused, studying the scene for a second before deciding he wasn’t really surprised.

He walked up to Luffy with a quirk in his brow.

“Uh….what are you doing?” he asked, the younger boy instantly perking up upon hearing Zoro’s voice.

“Zoro! You’re here!” Luffy chirped, as if this had been their designated meeting place all along.

“Yeah,” Zoro replied simply, crouching down in front of his friend and looking at the grass between them, where a large green caterpillar squirmed about.

“Isn’t it cool?” Luffy asked, giving its squishy body another poke without hesitation. “It looks juicy!”

Zoro balked. He was, admittedly, glad for Luffy’s obliviously innocent findings. It was a nice distraction. But he was not eager to watch the kid shove a caterpillar into his mouth.

“Luffy, if you eat it, I swear to fuck….

This earned him a hearty laugh from the younger boy, who picked the caterpillar up and held it over his open mouth teasingly before he snickered and stuck it over his upper lip instead.

“Caterpillar mustache!” he squawked for no reason, grinning when Zoro couldn’t help but crack a tiny smile.

Luffy hopped to his feet then, the insect still on his face, and offered a hand down to help Zoro up.

Zoro took it, despite it being unnecessary, and shook his head slightly at his friend in fond exasperation.

“So…..you out for a walk or what?” Zoro asked, resting the tip of his skateboard on the ground.

Luffy shrugged.

“Well, some of us split up to go look for you. I didn’t know where you went so I just started walking, and then I saw this guy!” he explained, pointing to the caterpillar with a smile.

Zoro smirked. It sounded exactly like a Luffy thing to do.

But he couldn’t help glancing at the house beside them, where said caterpillar had apparently been living. The ‘Coffin Boat’ house that, after getting a good look at it, lived up to the name.

It was painted a weathered black, standing out amidst the light pastels of its neighbors. It looked like a spider of sorts, with its angular roofs, perched atop those tall stilts.
It was also the only house on the street that he’d seen with a car parked beneath.

“‘In front of the weirdest house…’” Zoro mumbled, staring at it for a long minute….until he decided that he actually kind of liked how weird and creepy it was. It was different, which meant people probably left it well alone. Whoever owned it was lucky.

“Hey, do you think if I leave him here long enough, he’ll turn into a butterfly on my face?” Luffy was asking, pulling Zoro’s gaze back to him, and drawing a smirk across his lips.

“Dunno. Worth a shot,” the older teen replied.

Honestly, as dumb as it was, he was glad for Luffy’s silly musings. Luffy could distract him from just about anything. It was somewhat of a gift of the boy’s, that he could always be relied upon for mood-lifting, even if the kid most likely had no idea he was even capable.

Zoro didn’t know how he did it, considering he’d been through just as much as the rest of them. Luffy had been in a foster home before coming to Sunny, Zoro knew, with two other boys, boys he liked to call his brothers, even if they weren’t related by blood.

He talked about them all the time, told stories of all the crazy situations they’d gotten themselves into. Things had been great for him, it had seemed.

Until, that is, their foster mother had been accused of stealing, and they’d been taken away from her, moved to separate homes.

That had been seven years ago, and Zoro also knew that Luffy had no idea where Ace and Sabo had gone. They’d lost contact.

And yet, Luffy always seemed to have hope that they’d meet again.

Zoro wondered if he could have that same optimism for his own life.

“You goin’ back to Sunny, Zoro?” Luffy asked him, treading onto the house’s lawn without care to grab a fallen stick that looked particularly interesting. “I saw Sanji riding back home a couple minutes ago.”

Zoro’s expression couldn’t help but darken a bit. Still, he nodded and mumbled, “Yeah, m’goin’ back.”

“Cool, I’ll go with you!” Luffy replied, and swiveled on his heel, bouncing the stick happily along the sidewalk as he set to walking, a spring in his step.

Zoro watched him go for a few paces, then took one last look at the odd house, eyes wandering over the black shutters and narrow windows. The house rather reflected his mood today, he realized…

“You know everything’s gonna be okay, right?”

Luffy’s voice, and Zoro saw his friend had paused, looking back over his shoulder expectantly, that ridiculous caterpillar still situated beneath his nose.

Zoro couldn’t help the small amount of surprise that Luffy would ask him such a thing when he’d been busy thinking the opposite. Maybe a little embarrassment crawled onto his face over that fact.

His younger friend had a way of doing that, after all, making him feel foolish for his own worries, no matter how serious they seemed at the time. Most wouldn’t think a kid like Luffy capable of such
He thought of Sanji riding away from him, how much he’d wanted the blond to reach out to him, for once, but it was like something was preventing the two of them from ever connecting.

Would everything really be okay?

He sighed, looking at Luffy’s stupid face, and decided he’d believe him, if only in this moment. How could he deny the kid’s smile anyhow?

Zoro caught up to him, Luffy noticing his barely concealed smirk and giggling a bit before the two set off walking, side by side.

“I wish I was a caterpillar,” Luffy jabbered. “Wouldn’t it be fun to be all rubbery and stuff? I bet Brook would think so. He’s always complaining about old people joint problems—ooh, hey, I just remembered! Last night, Usopp told us that back before his mom died, this giant poisonous jellyfish got into his house and he fought it off with a fly swatter!”

“Really,” Zoro muttered with a snort, prompting Luffy to launch into a detailed explanation of the apparent incident.

The boys made their way down the street, neither noticing the slight movement of curtains in the dark house behind them.

Inside, a man sipped at a glass of red wine, rubbed absently at his own sharply angled mustache, observing hawkishly as the black-haired boy eventually tried to stick the caterpillar onto the other teen’s face, to much protest.

He watched them go for a minute.

Then ring-adorned fingers let the curtains fall back into place.

Sanji hadn’t waited for Zoro. He hadn’t waited, nor hardly listened to him at all, because as soon as he’d seen Brook’s lookalike fall in his game, he’d felt something change in the air. He wasn’t sure what it was, or even how to explain it without sounding completely crazy, but he’d felt something, dammit.

It was like a ripple, or a strange tremor in the air, and while it didn’t last long, it did leave a persisting feeling of dread in his chest, making him eager to get out of there, get back to the house and----

And what? Make sure Brook hadn’t died in real life? That was stupid.

The guy was old, but even if the game characters mysteriously looked like his friends, it was still just a game. Science was a thing, and it was impossible for the events in his game to be anything but sound and light contained within his 3DS.

Still, that didn’t stop him speeding away from the beach as fast as he could, standing up on his bike and pedaling hard, zipping back to the house along the same streets he’d leisurely rode down not long before.

The fact that he ditched Zoro in the process honestly didn’t even cross his mind. The mosshead had been acting weird anyway, even weirder than usual, and Sanji was pretty sure it had to do with that alcohol he’d been illegally consuming in broad daylight—the idiot.
He didn’t feel bad for what he’d said to him. He meant it. He wasn’t going to pity Zoro because he knew that was something he wouldn’t want, should he be in Zoro’s position. Pity would only make him feel weak, and he didn’t understand why Zoro had seemed so hurt by his words today when he hardly ever showed emotion one way or another.

Even if that morning had been particularly rough, what the hell did Zoro want from him? He knew they weren’t friends. Far from it. Was he expecting Sanji, of all people, to comfort him?

Zoro would be fine, anyway. Sanji wasn’t worried about him in the slightest.

What did worry him was the stupid clenching in his gut as he pedaled back to Sunny, the fact that Zoro, in the game, had prevented him from saving Brook.

It had seemed a little planned, like any first challenge in an RPG, semi-rigged against the player. But considering he’d chosen the permadeath option, that meant Brook was gone for good, and he had to combat his foolish fears about the real Brook.

The driveway was empty when he finally pulled up to the big red house, although he thought he heard Franky and Usopp’s voices coming from the backyard.

He stumbled off his bike, not even coming to a full stop, and quickly wheeled it back into the garage, panting slightly from his hard ride home.

Sanji all but sprinted into the house, into the kitchen, where he found Nami and Robin both at the counter, looking worried.

“Sanji!” Robin exclaimed, immediately straightening upon seeing just how damn flustered the blond was, standing there in the doorway with a frantic look about his face. “Is everything alright? Did you locate Zoro?”

“Yeah, yeah, he’s down by the pier,” Sanji answered distractedly, waving a hand. “Where’s Brook?”

Nami and Robin shared a look that was simultaneously relieved to hear Zoro was fine, but also entirely confused.

“Uh, he’s---upstairs, I think. Why?” Nami replied tentatively, but that was all Sanji needed to hear before he turned and ran off down the hall with a quick, “Thanks!”

He’d just made it to the foot of the stairs, just placed his hand on the white handrail when he heard a high-pitched shriek from upstairs. Chopper’s voice.

The door to Brook’s room was ajar, and, as he neared the landing, he could hear---no….was that---sobbing---within?

Pulse throbbing in his ears, terrified of what he might find, he forced himself up the last few steps, two at a time, practically leaped across the hall and burst his way into the half-open doorway of Brook’s bedroom, a trembling mess.

Chopper was seated on the bed, the young kid in a fit of wheezing hysterics......next to Brook, who
sat beside him, perfectly fine, with an entirely perplexed look on his face, peering closely at his smartphone in his hand. It was a device he’d only recently purchased, and he still had yet to get the hang of using it.

“No, no!” Chopper forced out between breathless giggles. “That’s Snapchat! You have to---have to go to your voicemail!”

The curly-haired boy stole a glance at the phone again, and burst into another peal of laughter upon seeing the dog ears and cartoony tongue protruding from Brook’s face on the screen.

“Chopper,” Brook chuckled lightly. “You know I don’t understand these things. Help an old man out----oh----” He looked up. “Sanji! You’re back!”

The two had noticed the blond, gripping the doorframe like a mad man, staring into the room with some degree of bewilderment on his features.

Chopper’s laughs quieted, and Brook began to look a little more serious, both sensing Sanji’s stress.

“Is everything alright?” Brook asked, just as Robin had.

Sanji blinked, almost unprepared for the scene before him, when he’d been imagining far worse, and it took him a few seconds to respond, eventually giving his head a little shake and stammering, “Yeah, I---what’s---going on in here…?”

It was an attempt at sounding casual, though he rather failed miserably, he thought.

Still, Chopper’s grin returned almost instantly, and he reached out to take Brook’s phone from him.

“Brook has a voicemail message, but he couldn’t figure out how to listen to it~ He kept opening different apps,” the boy explained, giving a few swipes and taps through the phone before eventually handing it back to the man. “Here. Just press the star key and hold the phone to your ear like this.”

He demonstrated with a gesture, something he absolutely didn’t need to do, but Brook merely smiled and followed his instructions, lifting the phone to finally listen to his message.

As he did, Chopper swung his legs off the end of the bed, gaze drifting to the vintage posters all around the room, from Brook’s days in his band, and later as a solo artist. In the corner stood a collection of pristine guitars that still saw regular use (and the occasional manhandling from one of the younger kids).

“Sanji, did you find Zoro…?” Chopper eventually asked, turning his head back to look at Sanji, a clump of brown curls falling into his face.

He tried to sound calm, but Sanji could sense the bit of worry in his voice.

It was no secret Zoro and Chopper were very close, and they made for a rather odd pair---the stoic, punk-haired teen, and the adorable little genius. But they cared about each other immensely, Zoro having been a huge source of comfort for Chopper in the aftermath of his father’s death, and Chopper had to be broken up about what had happened to Zoro that morning.

“Yeah…he was at the pier. Sure he’s on his way back now,” Sanji muttered, though his mind wasn’t really focused on his reply, still trying to come down from his distress over Brook’s safety.

He’d known it. Games were just that. Games. Just because Brook had died there, didn’t mean anything would happen here. That odd shift in the air he thought he’d felt? Surely it had just been his
imagination.

Chopper had let out a sigh of relief, a small smile coming back to his face.

“Oh. That’s good. I was worried,” he said, just as Brook lowered the phone from his ear, clearly done listening to his message.

Sanji and Chopper both redirected their gazes to the man. And they couldn’t help but notice the very obvious look of shock that had come over the musician’s features at some point.

“Brook, you okay?” Chopper asked, tilting his head. “Who called you?”

Brook let out a soft breath, a look of disbelief on his features.

Surprisingly, his eyes met Sanji’s directly, now shimmering with emotion.

Sanji furrowed his brow silently in question.

“That was Laboon…” Brook murmured.
Brook had been on the phone with Laboon now for over an hour, laughing and chatting about music and life and everything in between. And while it was amazing to see the old man so happy, Sanji couldn’t help but sit there at the kitchen counter, brows furrowed and fingers tapping a little anxiously on the glass of juice he held between his hands.

He sat there and stared into space, not even really looking as Brook’s form passed by now and again outside the glass doors, pacing the back patio with energetic gestures and a grin on his face.

What the hell did all of this mean? How the fuck was it possible that Laboon would suddenly, out of nowhere, regain contact with the man? Sure, luck could make anything happen, but this felt like….something else. And Sanji felt foolish for thinking that.

Nothing was wrong with Brook physically. If anything, he seemed even more lively than usual, so the game hadn’t harmed him in any way when he’d died, but the fact that this spell of good fortune had occurred immediately afterward got Sanji wondering crazy things. Things he never would have wondered before he got his hands on this fucking weird-ass game.

And it didn’t make sense because why would Brook dying in the game be able to make something good happen in real life...?

Suddenly, a head popped into his line of sight, a head with an army green bandana tied around it. Usopp stared at him from across the counter, lifted a hand, then slowly began to wave his arm up and down to get Sanji’s attention.

Sanji’s gaze sharpened, fixing on Usopp, who didn’t say anything when they made eye contact, just looked at him with his mouth drawn in a tight line before he started making strange wave motions with his arms, crossing them and uncrossing them fluidly.

The blond watched the dance for a long moment, deadpan. Then he finally quirked a brow and said, “What.”

“Nothing---you were spacing out,” Usopp replied, finally assuming a normal position, resting elbows on the marble countertop.

“Yeah, well, I’m thinking,” Sanji mumbled with a huff, plopping his chin into a hand and pouting slightly.

Usopp mirrored his pose, exaggerating a pout on his own lips to try and make Sanji crack a smile.

“Thinking about what?” he asked, and when he jutted his bottom lip out even more ridiculously, Sanji couldn’t help but reward him with the smirk he was looking for.

“Crazy stuff,” Sanji replied, unable to suppress a chuckle. “Probably better if I don’t mention it.”

“Something’s too crazy for Captain Usopp, the greatest storyteller that ever lived?” Usopp asked. Then the younger boy pointed a finger dramatically at his friend, assuming a grand pose. “I challenge you, Sir Sanji, for this ‘crazy’ knowledge you speak of!”

The blond let out a short bark of laughter in response to that. His friend had no idea how oddly relevant his theatrical statement was.
Should he tell him? Should he tell him everything about the game? About what he’d begun to wonder? Because if Usopp refused to believe it, then Sanji supposed there was really no use thinking about it any longer.

“I….” he started to say, and he almost pulled his 3DS from his backpack that sat at his feet. He almost gave in to the want to explain himself.

But he chickened out. Because at the last moment, a memory hit him.

He remembered when he was young, after his mother’s death.

As a boy, he could have sworn he saw her in places, especially at night, when he struggled to fall asleep. His eyes would close, tears streaming down his face, and suddenly, when he most needed it, he’d hear her voice, far too clearly to be his imagination, he always thought.

Her gentle tone would soothe him, and when he opened his eyes, there in the darkness, he’d been certain that he saw her standing over his bed, the radiance of her beautiful smile comforting him.

As a child, it had been the last bit of hope and happiness he’d clung to. He’d been sure it was real, and he’d been confident enough to tell his brothers.

But they’d laughed, insisted, harshly, that it couldn’t be true. That their mother was dead and there was no way she could ever come back. They’d told him he was insane, tried to beat sense into him….

Usopp wasn’t like his brothers. Far from it.

But Sanji left his 3DS in his backpack.

“Do you….believe that….one person can have control over fate….or destiny?” he asked instead, knowing that just that question alone sounded ridiculous.

He’d stopped having hope for that kind of shit long ago. And even if it did exist, why should he be the one in control? If the game even did what he thought it would…

Usopp looked surprised by the question, but he didn’t laugh, didn’t say anything right away. In fact, a pensive look came over his face, his brows drawing in and fingers stroking at his chin in a gesture that genuinely meant he was deep in thought, despite how caricatured it was.

“I dunno, Sanji,” he eventually replied. “It’s a cool idea, but it seems like a lot of responsibility, y’know? Some superhero stuff.”

“Okay, maybe not—all fate, but—what if one person could make—things happen for people they care about?” Sanji amended, honestly unsure of how to word the outlandish thought.

Again, Usopp considered his question seriously, tapping a finger over his lips. It was obvious he was unsure where these questions were coming from, but he seemed more than ready to entertain them, for which the blond was thankful.

“Well….that’s one thing, but….I kinda like to think that every person can make things happen for themselves, y’know? It shouldn’t all be on one person…”

“But, suppose it was!” Sanji cut in more forcefully. “What if they could—make good things happen! Should they do it or should they not mess with how things are supposed to go?”
Usopp’s brow furrowed.

“Good things…? Well…I guess if they’re helping people then it’s okay, but---” And he cracked a tiny smile. “Why are you asking this? You watch a movie or somethin’?”

Sanji sighed, wishing it was that simple.

“No, I was just—thinking. Y’know, deep shit you think about when you’re falling asleep. That kinda thing.”

Usopp chuckled.

“Gotcha. Know what I think about when I fall asleep? I think about that time an asteroid crashed down right outside my window when I was just a baby! And riding the asteroid were a pair of aliens that said—” He imitated his best nasally alien voice. “‘Take us to your leader. We’re hungry!’ So I brought them into my house and told them, ‘I am the leader! It is I, the emperor of this galaxy! Let me show you the wonders of peanut butter and marshmallow fluff sandwiches!’”

“You liar,” Sanji muttered, though he couldn’t help a smile, despite the abrupt change in subject. “So, as a baby, you just walked on into the kitchen and made them that shit?”

“Yup! And we all went bowling afterwards and played Xbox!”

“Uh huh,” the blond replied, shaking his head in response to the blinding grin Usopp shot at him, just before his friend’s eyebrows lifted and eyes widened.

“Oh! That reminds me!” the long-nosed boy exclaimed. “What did that game turn out to be? The one you bought yesterday?”

Sanji felt something strange twist in his chest. He’d decided to avoid the topic of the game, and yet, Usopp had gone right ahead and brought it up, despite not knowing just what it entailed.

“Turns out it’s just Animal Crossing,” he heard himself saying before he could decide otherwise. “Think I’ll take it back after school tomorrow. Don’t want two copies silently guiltling me into playing.”

A somewhat disappointed look came over Usopp’s face a second later.

“Aw man. I was hoping for something more exciting,” he mumbled, but shrugged. “Well, at least it was only fifteen bucks.”

“Yeah…” Sanji mumbled, lifting his glass and taking a sip of his juice, a strange guilt overcoming him.

It was almost like he couldn’t talk about it. Like something was preventing him…but he knew it was merely his own paranoia about what the others would say.

Until Usopp asked, “Can I see it?”

There was a long pause, in which Sanji didn’t reply, just blinked at his friend as if he hadn’t heard the question.

“What?” he eventually stuttered foolishly.

“Yeah,” Usopp said, holding out a hand. “Maybe I can hack into it and see if there’s already a save file on it or something.”
“Oh, I don’t---I mean, it’s fine,” Sanji quickly stammered, unsure how Usopp would even go about such a thing....or if it was even possible, for that matter.

But Usopp grinned, jamming a thumb to his chest proudly.

“No game is too hard to crack for the great---”

“Alright, alright,” the blond muttered, uneager to hear another ridiculous spiel, and after a moment’s hesitation, forced himself to duck under the counter with a few quiet curses under his breath.

How could he justify lying about the game to his friend?

He slowly pulled out his 3DS, sat up and flipped it open, fully prepared to power it off and hand him the cartridge only, stalling as long as he could.

But Usopp snatched the 3DS out of his hands before he could protest, turning the screen towards himself and frowning.

Sanji watched with dismay as Usopp’s eyes fell upon the screen, which was still paused on the title slide for the next chapter of the fantasy game, that familiar “Proceed” pictured over a faded image of the prince’s castle. The faint orchestral score of the background music played from the speakers.

Strangely though, Usopp frowned, briefly turned the device back towards Sanji, and asked, “Is it off?”

He pressed the power button then without further word, and Sanji lunged forward, nearly knocking over his juice in his haste to stop Usopp from shutting off the game.

But nothing happened.

The game kept playing as before, even when Usopp mashed the button again, held it down for longer. It had no effect.

“Think you gotta charge it,” Usopp said with a chuckle, eventually passing the 3DS back to the stunned blond, who sat there with arms still sprawled over the counter, a look of complete confusion on his face.

Because the game was still playing, plain as day, on the screen, and the music was clearly audible.

He took the 3DS back slowly, stared at it to make sure he wasn’t imagining it, then whipped his head back up to look at his friend.

“You messin’ with me?” he asked, to which Usopp frowned.

“What do you mean?” Usopp replied. “It’s dead.”

It wasn’t, the blue power light blazing strong. In fact, Sanji turned up the volume experimentally, blasting the music unexpectedly, but Usopp didn’t even flinch as he normally would have at such a sudden loud sound.

Could he….seriously not see it?

“If you need to borrow my charger, you can,” Usopp was saying, still just as oblivious as before, and Sanji felt his heart begin to pound harder in his chest.

“Ugh, turn that fucking music down. It’s obnoxious.”
Suddenly, a dumb voice behind him, and Sanji couldn’t help but jump in his seat, visibly, judging by the snort he heard from the mosshead.

Zoro and Luffy had come back, both of them coming into the kitchen, Luffy with a caterpillar on his eyebrow that immediately drew Usopp’s attention, the younger boy abandoning his exchange with Sanji in favor of running at Luffy to get a look at the bug.

But Sanji could hardly care about that, because Zoro had reacted to the music, when Usopp hadn’t. And while it was still possible that Usopp could have been messing with him…..the hunch Sanji had? It told him otherwise.

“I said turn it down. You deaf or somethin’?” Zoro muttered as he stalked past, jerking his chin irritably at the 3DS still blasting sound.

The blond gaped at him, for once not even focused on the asshole’s bitter tone. He watched as Zoro’s eyes lingered on the screen, actually noticed what was there before he looked away and made his way to the fridge, throwing the door open and sticking his head in.

Luffy and Usopp were still entirely preoccupied with the caterpillar, Usopp letting it crawl all over his hand as he examined it more closely and made comments about its coloration.

Sanji made a split-second decision.

“Luffy!” he called out impulsively, then got to his feet and practically shoved his 3DS in the boy’s face. “Check out my new game!”

He knew the kid wouldn’t be able to resist messing around with it.

With the 3DS an inch from his eyes, Luffy blinked innocently, staring at the device for a long moment.

Then he promptly burst into full-blown, stomach-holding laughter.

“Good one, Sanji---!” he cackled, tears of mirth coming to his eyes. “There’s nothing even there!”

More laughter, and Usopp joined in as well, looking a little relieved that Luffy was now in on the joke too.

“Right? He sure got me!” Usopp agreed, just before Luffy practically hopped onto his back and knocked him over.

Luffy pointed to the back door, as if he expected Usopp to drag him there.

“C’mon, Usopp! Let’s go caterpillar hunting! I wanna find one as long as a snake!”

“As long as a snake?” Usopp chuckled, indeed half-dragging the other boy along, still holding the caterpillar gingerly. “That’s nothing! One time, I wrestled one as big as an elephant!”

“Really?!”

“Uh huh! And its mother was there too! She was so mad I disturbed her house that she force-fed me spinach and soap opera reruns---”

And that was the last Sanji heard as the two younger boys tumbled eagerly out the back door and went gallivanting across the patio towards the woods, past Brook, who was now seated comfortably on one of the deck chairs, still chatting amiably on the phone.
This left a thoroughly perplexed Sanji alone in the kitchen with Zoro. And of course, his 3DS in hand that still blared his game, unmistakable on the screen.

Zoro had straightened, yet to move from the open fridge, but with a stick of string cheese jutting out from his mouth rather comically as he stared after Luffy and Usopp, looking entirely befuddled, brow drawn in tight and features scrunched like some kind of neanderthal trying to process fire.

He stood there for a few seconds. Then he quickly stalked over to peer at the 3DS, leaning intrusively over Sanji’s shoulder as he examined the screen, tapped a grubby finger at the power light.

“Th’fuck? There’s totally a game,” he mumbled around the string cheese, and seemed about to grab the 3DS from Sanji’s hands to start pressing buttons before the blond snatched it out of his reach and quickly grabbed his backpack, backing slowly towards the hallway, even forgetting his juice on the counter.

He glared at Zoro, though he didn’t really have reason to. Zoro had just confirmed the game’s existence, and it seemed he was the only one aware of it.

But wasn’t that reason enough to glare? Why the hell could only Zoro see it?

Sanji hurried from the room without another word, desperate to disprove this theory.

---

The horses are still panting heavily from the forceful gallop away from the castle, their legs quivering and heads hung low as they take great gulps from the cool stream. They’d been lucky to get away as fast as they had, but it’s honestly only because they managed to gather half the necessary supplies in their haste to escape. They hadn’t been dragged down by extra weight.

Sanjius slides off Siren’s back, the memory of those arrows thudding dully into Brokard’s chest replaying over and over in his mind.

He leaves Siren there to drink, his friends slowly regaining their bearings as well, atop their mounts, and he starts to stumble his way through the underbrush, to the edge of the trees.

Instantly, an arm crosses his path, and he finds himself manhandled back towards the group by Sir Zorin.

But this time, he’s not having it. Zorin dragged him all the way here, practically, and he doesn’t care if he’s still in blasted shock. He’s going to damned well have his way now.

He shoves Zorin away with a broken utterance of, “Get off me,” before he nearly collapses against a tree at the perimeter of the clearing.

He can smell the foliage, that fresh scent of pine that often draws him to the forest on overcast days when the ocean isn’t favorable.

But there’s also a whiff of smoke in the air.

They’re atop a hill, and spread out below is the town surrounding the castle, and the sea beyond. And Sanjuus can’t take his eyes off the bright flicker of flames that burns brilliantly in the night sky, engulfing a block of buildings near the port, where a huge ship is docked---the invaders’ ship---the sails furled and painted with the number, “66.”
Sanjius has no idea who they are, why they are here, or how they got as far as the castle itself.

But he can do nothing aside from watch as his beloved kingdom struggles without him there.

He has fled, and there is no greater shame than that, for a royal.

And Brokard is…

He doesn’t know how long he stands there and stares, doesn’t know how long he stands there with the cool breeze blowing peacefully around him and the quiet sounds of the brook behind him, his friends’ voices….the shouts and cries from town barely audible in the distance, almost as if they don’t exist at all.

“Your Highness…”

A quiet, cautious voice and a gentle hand on his shoulder, but it’s enough to have him snap, nearly lashing out at the person beside him...until he sees it’s Namilia, sorrow on her face barely masked by worry as her eyes flick over him.

“Your Highness, Robisia wishes to check you for inju---”

“I’m not hurt,” Sanjius replies, his voice soft, but his tone tense as could be.

“Yes, but those arrows were poisonous. My powers cannot counteract such afflictions. I would just like to be certain,” Robisia says from somewhere behind him, and it’s only then that his expression hardens over and he finally tears himself away from the sight of his pillaged kingdom to turn back towards the group.

They’ve all dismounted, and they’re all looking similarly solemn.

Sir Luffient stands silently near the horses, his head bowed and his eyes obscured by his sweaty hair that flops into his face. Sir Usio and Sir Francus are close by, both clearly trying to keep tears at bay by keeping their gazes fixed firmly on the resting horses near the water.

None of them are in full armor. There hadn’t been enough time, only for shoulder and chest plates which were still thrown on far too hastily. Weapons are now strapped, with equal haste, to the horses.

Robisia is seated on a fallen log next to Sir Chonrad, who is currently wrapping a roll of bandages over Sir Zorin’s arm, the white cotton slowly obscuring a line of strange green leaves Chonrad has placed over Zorin’s wound, most likely for medicinal purposes.

“It only grazed your skin,” Sir Chonrad is saying to Zorin, voice a near whisper, and quivering at that, despite trying to sound confident. “Not enough poison entered your bloodstream to do you much harm. We’ll keep the wound clean and be mindful of it....”

Zorin murmurs, “I’ll be fine,” watching Chonrad finish his wrapping for a few more seconds before his eyes have lifted to the prince.

Their gazes meet for a second, and something peculiar passes there. Sanjius feels it. He’s not sure what it is at first, though his mind eventually settles on ‘guilt’ when Zorin quickly averts eyes a mere second later.

Good. He should feel guilty. Brokard didn’t have to be the one to….to....
“Your Highness…”

This time, it’s Robisia’s hand that touches him, gently encircling his wrist and pulling him over to sit on the log as well, her fingers automatically glowing an icy blue as they hover over his head, his arms, and torso, down to his ankles before finally pulling away.

“You are unharmed,” Robisia confirms, sounding relieved, but her voice also has a grave tone to it, the unsaid, ‘But at what cost…?’ lingering in the air.

Sanjius doesn’t reply. He can’t. What can he possibly say or do that will remedy any of this? He’s always believed his friends when they say they will lay down their lives for him, but he’s never expected for it to be put into practice.

Perhaps he and his kingdom have simply been lucky up until this point.

As if reading his mind, Robisia murmurs, “Prince Sanjius, your safety is of utmost importance to the kingdom. We all know this. Brokard knew this especia---”

“But he didn’t have to---to do that!” Sanjius insists, knowing he shouldn’t be raising his voice against her, but unable to help it when he remembers his loyal companion calmly placing himself in the path of those arrows, as if it had been his destiny all along. “It shouldn’t matter if I’m---royalty! I never wanted any of you to---”

“Robisia…maybe it’s time…”

Surprisingly, it’s Francus’ voice that interrupts him, the large knight fixing a serious gaze on the older woman, who seems to understand his meaning as soon as their eyes meet.

Hers flash with an odd darkness before they close and she nods, looking almost resigned for a moment.

But focus returns as soon as she opens her eyes, her gaze softening somewhat when it falls on Sanjius.

The prince doesn’t understand, and neither does anyone besides Francus and Robisia, by the looks of similar confusion that cloud their expressions.

“Time for what…?” Sanjius mutters cautiously, feeling his heart clench hard in his chest. He’s not sure if he can take any more shock. Not tonight.

Francus and Robisia share one last glance before Robisia sighs.

“Your Highness, it appears that your father, or at least, your father’s army, is to blame for tonight’s attack.”

There is a beat of silence while the news sinks in amongst the group.

It’s followed by collective gasps and noises of disbelief from his friends.

But Sanjius remains quiet, and he’s not sure how. For some reason, the news isn’t as shocking as it perhaps should be. His father may have been missing for years upon years now, but who else would attack the kingdom? Baratia is allied with all its surrounding nations.

It’s not surprising when he thinks about it, especially given the timing. It’s been a long time since his father disappeared, but what better time to retake his throne than before his son’s coronation? His
father always did have a flair for the dramatic…

Robisia seems to sense the prince’s lack of reaction, but she still reaches out to squeeze his hand comfortably.

“He wants his throne…” Sanjius mutters, brow furrowed, though his gaze is fixed blankly ahead. He can feel his friends watching him, though one seems to watch with more intensity than the rest. The swordsman may have lost an eye, but his stare continues to be the strongest.

Robisia lets out a breath, seems to hesitate a little, and Sanjius isn’t quite sure why.

Until she speaks, and as soon as she does, he understands her hesitation.

“Your Highness, your father was never the rightful king…” she says gently, but with confidence in what she has to tell him.

She doesn’t waver, even when there are yet more sounds of shock from the younger members of the group. Francus betrays none either, however, and in fact, it seems this is what he’d been urging her to tell the group.

Sanjius isn’t sure what he feels, but, again, it’s not the reaction one would expect him to give.

And he’s not quite sure why he remains silent either. Perhaps it’s his trust in Robisia that has him waiting patiently for the rest of what she has to say.

She takes his silence as an opportunity to continue, her blue eyes trained only on him now.

“Do not mistake me,” she implores. “You are indeed next in line for the throne. But it is through your mother’s blood. Your father was not of nobility. His title was one of ceremony, brought about by his marriage to your mother.”

She takes a moment to glance at Francus, who moves to calmly sit across from them, leaning back against a tree.

Usio and Namilia look ready to interject with questions, but Sanjius holds up a hand, demanding they listen without a word.

Out of the corner of his eye, Sanjius can see the deep furrow in Zorin’s brow, but the mosshead says nothing.

Robisia continues.

“A year before you were born, your father overtook the throne by force. From your maternal grandfather, King Zephyr,” the woman explains. “It is unknown whether your grandfather still lives. There was a great skirmish, and he disappeared. It’s possible your father’s army killed him. However, I’d like to remain optimistic. Many believe that he led the rebellion that drove your father out.”

Sanjius watches her for a long moment, and she holds his gaze seriously.

Eventually, he murmurs, “How do you know this….?”

Robisia sighs.
“Both Sir Francus and I had parents who supported your maternal bloodline. My mother and his father. Unfortunately, they both perished in the fight to prevent your father from taking over. This is why, five years later, we elected to devote ourselves to you, following the Queen’s death, and the disappearance of your siblings.”

Francus nods solemnly in agreement, and it’s clear that only he and Robisia know about this. The looks on his other friends’ faces spells that much. The two may hail from different lands, but they were the only ones alive for this rebellion Robisia speaks of, weren’t they.

Save for Brokard….and Sanjius realizes, with a sharp pang in his chest, that he’ll never know how much his loyal comrade knew…

“Why didn’t you tell me…?” he asks quietly, an important question that isn’t necessarily accusatory, rather the next logical inquiry he should pose, his mind working automatically.

But Robisia has an answer right away, and it’s clear it’s been premeditated.

“Until today, it was a bit of history that did not affect you. If your grandfather was indeed killed, he is no longer in power. And if he wasn’t killed….well, I believe his choice not to emerge from wherever he has hidden himself has made clear his intentions. We did not wish to burden you with yet more darkness.”

Sanjius supposes he should be grateful. Robisia is right, after all. When his mother died and his father disappeared with his siblings, he’d been a mere four years old. Until now, he’s lived untroubled, without fear, and with the support of his people.

And thus, it’s with a level head that he nods, though it’s mostly because there’s nothing else to do.

Brokard is dead, and he has no doubt other innocents in his kingdom are too, potentially at his father’s hands. As things stand, it is his responsibility to fight for them, to take care of his kingdom.

Perhaps this is what Robisia is thinking as well, because she again squeezes his hand gently and says, “This is why you must be protected, at all costs. Brokard knew this. You are the kingdom’s hope. You must stay alive. And all of us are willing to do whatever it takes to ensure this.”

He doesn’t like it. He hates the thought of more of his friends dying for him. He hasn’t even come to terms with Brokard’s sacrifice, and here his friends are, looking at him with the same resignation in their eyes as Brokard had when those arrows pierced his chest.

But hasn’t he always been prepared to die for his country…?

“You all have my eternal gratitude,” the prince says, the words sounding hollow and well-rehearsed, despite the fact that he means them. “But our cause will be better fought with you all alive. If my father has truly returned to take the throne, then he will surely not go down without a fight. And that still leaves the matter of my sister. If she is with him, then I’m afraid she is the true heir—–”

“But--!!” Usio finally interjects quickly, the tiniest bit of fear in his voice. “The people have chosen you! I know they’ll fight for you! You’ve stayed in Baratia all this time! You are our prince!”

“I appreciate that,” Sanjius replies, again in a voice that almost seems reserved for these kinds of situations. He wasn’t entirely aware he was capable of this calm leadership. “But you all must be ready for anything.”

“Yes,” Robisia adds. “There may still be some traditionalists amongst the people. As the prince
“S-So what do we do?” Chonrad asks, trying his hardest to combat the tears that stubbornly well in big, brown eyes. “We’re strong, but---there’s only---e-eight of us now….we can’t take a---a whole army!”

“So we get a bigger army.”

It’s Luffient that speaks next, his voice unwavering and assertive.

When Sanjius turns his head to look at him, the knight is standing, fists at his sides and a serious look about his face that is rare but powerful.

“We keep going to Whole Cakia. We find the princess lady that Sanjius is supposed to marry, and we bring back more fighters,” Luffient states, as if it will be the simplest mission, and in his mind, it probably seems that way.

His eyes lock into Sanjius then, and it doesn’t matter that he’s not royalty. He may as well be with that commanding aura.

“I don’t want anyone else to be my king,” Luffient proclaims. “Only Sanjius. He can be king of Baratia, but I’m gonna be king of his whole army so that Baratia can keep being free. We’re gonna save the kingdom. ‘Cause it’s his and that’s the way it should be. And we’re gonna make Brokard proud.”

Luffient finishes his little speech, and there is silence, save for the very distant chaos that’s close to inaudible beneath the gentle lapping and trickling of the nearby stream.

But his words ring clear, and, over every bit of carefully concealed uncertainty in Sanjius’ mind, washes strength.

Some would think it foolish or weak, that a prince would allow a knight’s decision to hold such weight, but Sanjius doesn’t see it that way. His friends’ wishes are his, just as his are theirs, so it’s completely natural that he feels some of the burden lift off his shoulders, especially when the others begin to react with gradual concession, even amusement.

Namilia is wiping tears from her eyes, but she’s back to chiding Luffient for his one-track mind. Usio and Chonrad have put on their best brave faces, and both Francus and Robisia have gentle smiles.

Zorin takes his eyes off Luffient though, and turns his gaze to the prince again, a lingering smirk on his lips as he quirks his brow, almost in challenge.

It’s rather infuriating. This is not the time, nor the place for a challenge, and seeing how smug the damned bastard looks after everything should be an insult to the tragedy unfolding but a mile away.

But it is also not the time to grieve. Not yet. It is not the time for hesitation or doubt.

Baratia is his. Baratia is theirs.

It is their home, and though Sanjius hates to leave it at a time like this, he knows when a fight is futile.

“You heard him,” he says, breaking Zorin’s gaze, having apparently held it for longer than he’d thought.
He gets to his feet and moves towards the horses, only looking back over his shoulder when he reaches Siren’s side, tightening the straps on some of the supply packs he’d quickly attached to her saddle.

“Let’s at least find a safer place to camp for the night.”

They’ll need to regroup in the morning, probably find a village in which to pick up more supplies, but for now, with his friends at his side, mounting their horses and willing to press onward, Sanjius thinks he can at least get through this night.

One step at a time...

One by one, Sanji had shoved his 3DS in everyone’s faces, as dumb as it was. And one by one, everyone else in the house had expressed their utter confusion over the weird joke Sanji was apparently playing. The joke that involved the existence of some “imaginary” game. He hadn’t tried it on Brook yet, but he wasn’t looking to interrupt the man’s exciting phone call. And if it hadn’t been visible to anyone else, why would Brook suddenly be able to see it?

The blond had been creeped out, but also furious, and he’d stormed to his room and locked the door, eager to keep out the mosshead until he could fucking process what was going on. Not that Zoro had even tried to come in.

Why Zoro…? Why Zoro? Was it because he’d been the one to come across the game initially? Was that why he could see it and no one else could?

Possibly. He’d rubbed his dirty fingers all over it in the store. Maybe his plant DNA had gotten infused somehow.

But it still made absolutely no sense. It was like some...some magic shit, and this was all territory the blond felt entirely nervous about entering. That would just be crazy, after all. Magic wasn’t real.

There had been nothing else to do but throw himself onto his bed and tear into the game once more in search of answers.

But soon enough, dinner time had crept up, more quickly than Sanji had anticipated, and yet, the game hadn’t revealed any more hints as to what the fuck was going on with the day’s odd occurrences, at least not that he could tell.

A little frustrated, especially after so many cutscenes, the blond ultimately shut his 3DS and headed back downstairs to help Robin with dinner preparations. He could handle it all himself, but he had to admit there was something nice about having a partner of sorts in the kitchen, an extra pair of hands.

Things seemed relatively normal, he thought, aside from Robin suggesting they adjust the menu a bit to include some of Zoro’s favorite foods, just to help him feel better after that morning. That was all fine. Zoro liked simple, easy shit. The problem was that Sanji’s mind was entirely elsewhere.

Hands were able to work automatically, through sheer muscle memory until he had, by most people’s standards, a rather impressively designed meal of rice, fish, and vegetables laid out on the table.

But his full heart wasn’t in it, and though most didn’t seem to notice as the meal was devoured with the usual vigor, flying limbs and raucous voices filling the kitchen, Sanji could still somehow sense the stupid mosshead’s awareness of this fact.
Sanji had sat himself at his usual spot at the far corner of the table, closest to the kitchen, should he need to run back and forth, Zoro on the same side, with Luffy and Chopper between them. He knew Zoro sat there so there was no risk of eye contact happening.

But then why the hell did he keep feeling those glances? Why did Zoro keep looking at him each time Luffy sat back, affording him a view?

He’d been trying to avoid the fact that there was something they both knew about that no one else did. And he’d assumed Zoro would want to as well.

Sanji ignored it, instead focusing on monitoring the comfortingly chaotic table as he usually did, trying to keep creeping hands from Nami or Robin’s plates, refilling glasses where needed and dishing out seconds (or thirds).

It was almost enough to distract him from his swirling thoughts.

Until, that is, the meal began to die down, Luffy flopping back in his chair, looking stuffed and exhausted from shoveling so much food in his face. With Luffy calmer, the entire table seemed to follow suit, and, soon, Chopper had leaned forward to look across the table at Brook, curiosity shining in his eyes.

“Brook, what did Laboon have to say?” the boy asked, swinging short legs that just barely touched the ground. “You two were talking for a while.”

Brook looked up when the rest of the table turned to him, still with a smile on his face from the happy little tune he’d been humming but a minute ago. In fact, his mood had been considerably energetic the whole meal.

“We certainly were,” the man replied. “I apologize, Chopper~ We couldn’t finish the puzzle.”

“It’s okay,” Chopper assured. “You and Laboon hadn’t talked for a hundred years!”

“A hundred~” Brook chuckled. “Not yet it hasn’t been~”

Oddly though, a second later, the old man quieted a bit, lips turned up placidly. But his smile looked a little bittersweet now, and something about it struck Sanji, made a twinge of nerves tug at his chest.

“Laboon is doing well,” Brook continued, despite the look. “His adopted father passed, I’m afraid, but the boy is grown up. He has his own band now~ A rock band called Whale. I’d never heard of them, but apparently most of their publicity is directed online. I suppose it’s no wonder an old man like me wouldn’t know of them. But they’re beginning a nationwide tour soon.”

“Really?” Usopp chirped. “That’s so cool!”

Luffy let out a listless cheer of, “Yeahh…”, an attempt at excitement but a failure given his current food hangover.

“You gotta go see ‘em play!” Franky added. “Hell, I wanna go! Bet they’re super awesome!”

“I’m certain they are,” Brook said with a smile. “He played me a few snippets of their songs over the phone.”

But then Sanji saw that smile fade just a little bit, and he barely had time to wonder why before Brook continued.
“Actually, he...invited me to join them on the tour,” Brook said.

The reaction from the table was, first, collective disbelief and shock....followed quickly by simultaneous outbursts of joy from the youngest members of the group especially.

Usopp, Chopper, and Luffy practically dove on the man with excited cries, Luffy and Chopper from across the table, narrowly missing the serving dishes.

Just as quickly as things had quieted after the meal, frenzy and commotion picked up again, and Zoro was left feeling rather overwhelmed.

Sanji had to have felt it too because he wasn’t reacting as the others were, Zoro noticed. He sat quietly, despite Brook’s news, with a furrow to his brow that he’d had for most of the meal, and Zoro knew it probably had nothing to do with Luffy’s table manners either.

No, knowing that idiot, his mind was in the same place Zoro’s had been that whole afternoon.

He could see Sanji’s game. No one else could.

Why? And why were….things happening, all of a sudden?

He’d had interviews, and now someone Brook hadn’t heard from in decades appeared out of the woodwork and invited him to join a new band?

Zoro supposed he should be happy, but he couldn’t help but wonder if Brook’s opportunity wouldn’t fall through like his had. He wasn’t a pessimist. He was just being realistic.

All of this felt too weird, too out of the blue, and Zoro couldn’t place the odd feeling he had in regards to all of it.

And the one person who maybe, just maybe, felt it too, was Sanji, who seemed content to pretend nothing was off.

Like he would even talk to Zoro about it anyway.

“So are you gonna do it?” Luffy was asking Brook, a starry look in his eyes as he no doubt imagined the man in a concert arena again, rocking out like he used to.

“He has to!” Usopp exclaimed, sweeping a hand out in front of him. “Just imagine! His big comeback!”

Brook chuckled, an arm around Chopper’s shoulders, the boy having, at some point, circled around the table to settle in the old man’s lap.

“I’d love to. Truly, I would,” he answered, but he paused soon after, guilty eyes flicking to Franky and Robin, who’d both looked at each other as well. “It would be a commitment though....a year-long commitment.”

“A year?” Chopper yelped, Luffy and Usopp sharing similar looks of surprise, despite their encouragement of moments ago.

Brook nodded, lips turning up a little sadly.

“Yes,” he said. “I must think hard...”

But it was Robin who swiftly cut in, kind support and confidence in her eyes.
“Brook, you mustn’t let us hold you back. If you wish to pursue this, by all means, you should,” she said. “You would be missed, but Franky and I are more than capable of handling things.”

“Yeah, bro,” Franky added. “You can’t really pass this up. YOLO, right?”

“Don’t say that,” Nami scolded, cringing at his word choice, but she nodded in agreement, though she looked a little sad about it.

It took Usopp and Chopper another moment before they eventually nodded too, but Luffy didn’t even hesitate in screeching his support from where he’d sprawled himself over the table, now the sole barrier between Zoro and Sanji.

“Yeah, that’s….that’s awesome, Brook,” the blond murmured, and Zoro couldn’t help his gaze from shifting back to the other teen yet again.

Sanji looked to be in some state of disbelief, and while that was probably understandable given the massive opportunity Brook had just been afforded, it was like his mind was elsewhere, not lending the conversation his rapt attention like the others.

“You should do it,” Zoro heard himself contributing, because he knew Brook should, and he didn’t want his previous silence to seem unsupportive, despite his distraction with Sanji’s potential thoughts.

Brook was slowly looking more comfortable, allowing himself to get excited again now that he knew he had their support, and chatter began anew, this time about whether they’d be seeing Brook on TV anytime soon, or whether Nami could start selling his autograph.

Of course this meant their old friend would have to leave them, and that was fucking bittersweet, but ultimately, this was good. They all knew he’d been itching to get back into performing again, despite his advanced age. And honestly, more power to him.

Zoro could only hope his own stupid botched interviews had been a fluke.

So why the hell did Sanji seem so damn perturbed? Why did he clean up after dinner as quickly as possible, with hardly a word to anyone, and steal away upstairs like he was late for something important?

Zoro followed him. He’d probably get his ass kicked for it, but he followed him, despite how much of a dick Sanji had been to him earlier, because Sanji always did this. He always fucking isolated himself, and while Zoro understood, did the same thing more often than not, this time, it was probably over something dumb.

He didn’t even know if he was going to confront Sanji, just that he found himself walking upstairs and hovering outside the closed door to their room, a few minutes after Sanji had disappeared through it.

Unsurprisingly, he heard the blond’s muffled voice inside, and the sound of footsteps padding back and forth across the carpet.

The weirdo was in there, talking to himself, pacing back and forth.

Zoro risked leaning closer, pressing his ear to the door to try and hear what the guy was saying.

Strangely, Sanji seemed stuck between the words “kill”, “dead”, and “leave”…..peppered with various frustrated noises and curses.
The last clear question Zoro heard was, “Should I kill someone else…?” before things went quiet and he heard the creak of Sanji’s bed, then the music of his 3DS when he no doubt opened it again. “What the hell…?” Zoro mumbled under his breath, utterly baffled by what sounded like murderous thoughts from the blond.

He moved away from the door, leaning, instead, against the wall beside it.

Eventually, he slid down the wall to the floor where he sat, wondering when the hell he’d become so damn preoccupied with a guy that treated him like shit.

Not to mention what that said about him.

They’ve moved their small caravan a few extra miles into the forest, stopping at a secluded little glen with a concealing canopy of leaves and branches from the trees above them, still beside the stream.

Namilia has put up a protective spell over their little camp, just in case, and everyone is settling down for the night. It’s late; they’re exhausted, and they need their rest for the long journey ahead, not to mention combating any potential foes that may pursue them.

Sanjius isn’t surprised when Zorin elects himself as watchkeeper with a promise to wake Robisia after an hour so she can have a shift. It’s a promise he surely won’t keep if the prince knows anything about his knight.

He should be resting too. He should be settling down with his friends, seeking comfort from them, but instead, Sanjius has snuck off into the trees by himself. Feet move as quietly as they can, and he’s thankful for the bed of dead pine needles that coats much of the forest floor, softening any sound he makes.

It’s dark, but the moon is bright, filtering through the trees in long beams of silvery light. There’s beauty in those beams, but, in the prince’s mind, they simply turn into ghostly arms---the people, his people---innocents that are, tonight, lost to this world because of him, reaching for him fruitlessly.

Rationally, he knows it’s useless to blame himself. No good will come of it. And yet, all that fills his mind is the thought that he’ll never hear Brokard’s contagious laugh again, never hear the sweet sound of his violin melodies, never be able to rely on him for advice or….or anything.

It’s this that has him stopping, closer to camp than he’d intended, but when his legs practically give out, he knows he’s not going any farther.

Tears have stained his cheeks, teeth clenching painfully against the burning in his throat and the sobs that threaten to escape him.

The prince huddles himself at the base of a tree and pulls up knees. He buries his face against them and cries in a way he hasn’t for many, many years.

He cries until everything fades to black.

When Sanjius opens his eyes again, the moonlight is no longer strong. In fact, the forest is imbued with the faint purples and blues that signify the coming sunrise.

He’s fallen asleep, he realizes. For many hours, it seems.
The prince lifts his head from where it had fallen against the rough tree trunk, glancing around him, rather disoriented by the fact that he’s outside to begin with, the events of the previous night not quite seeping back into his memory for another few moments.

But then, Brokard’s final smile. The image of his saber outstretched, and that single arrow sailing across the great hall---

Sanjius uses all of his willpower to block it from his mind, instead lifting a hand to numbly wipe at his face and the remains of tear tracks.

He stays where he is for several minutes, not yet hearing movement from the direction of the camp. Everyone else is probably still asleep.

He looks down at himself. He’s still wearing his same tunic and breeches from the night before, the only thing protecting him from the elements his long cloak which----he realizes hadn’t been on him when he’d wandered out here.

The prince sits up, staring down at the thick blue fabric as if he’s never seen it before, but he can’t remember taking it, which means someone brought it to him. But who?

A rather embarrassing stomach growl keeps him from thinking on it for too long. He should prepare something for the group to eat before they start moving. So he gets to his feet, a little stiff from his odd sleeping position, tying his cloak tighter over his shoulders and heading back towards camp.

He finds himself taking his time, examining various bushes and discovering that some are medicinal herbs. He distracts himself from his darkening thoughts by picking some to take back to camp, knowing Chonrad or Robisia can make use of them. And he’s also a little surprised to find a hunting knife lying on the ground by a tangle of tree roots. He picks this up too and slips it through his belt.

Sanjius is used to getting up early, and perhaps it’s his internal clock that’s gotten him to rise now. This time of day, past the dead silence of the night, but before the rising of the world, is so peaceful to him, and it’s almost as if only he exists. With none of the pain and suffering that only comes about when other people awaken.

Between the trees, he sees a glimpse of Wado’s glistening white hide in the distance, the horse’s head bowed as she quietly grazes on a patch of grass, taking advantage of the fresh dew.

She hears his approach and she looks up, her long forelock nearly obscuring her dark, inquisitive eyes before she goes back to grazing calmly. In the dim light, she looks almost like a unicorn, and despite everything, Sanjius almost smirks at the thought of Sir Zorin riding one of those shimmering magical beasts into battle. Perhaps if he imagines the fool wearing a gown as well, it will make him feel even better.

“We should get moving soon.”

Sanjius nearly jumps out of his skin, whirling around to face the source of that voice as if it’s an attacker, even if he recognizes those gravelly tones. He can’t exactly help it. A few hours ago, he was forced to flee for his life.

A few muttered curses under his breath, a hand subtly rubbing over his chest as his heart hammers beneath. When he’s regained some semblance of his dignity, he manages to glare harshly at Zorin for sneaking up on him.

The knight is standing a few feet away, an arm resting on his swords, the other bandaged one hanging at his side, his expression passive. He doesn’t show any amusement over spooking him, at
least, but Sanjius still feels the need to be curt with his reply. He’s not exactly in the mood for stupid tricks right now.

“We’re not going anywhere until we’ve all had something to eat,” he mutters, hands moving to absently bunch together the herbs he carries. Thankfully, his little scare didn’t cause him to drop any.

“Fine,” Zorin mumbles right back, but instead of stalking off, he just stands there, and when Sanjius looks up, their eyes meet awkwardly, both averting them as soon as they do.

Sanjius doesn’t know what in damnation he’s supposed to say. Well, he does know. A ‘thank you’ is in order. Zorin saved his life, after all. But, in the process, he left Brokard, and---

No. He’d thought about it last night, but he knows he can’t blame Zorin for that now. Even if Zorin can’t be harmed.

Brokard was close to all of them. And as unfeeling as Zorin seems, Sanjius can see the unexpressed grief on the knight’s features when he steals another glance his way.

“Does your arm pain you…?” the prince asks eventually, feeling as if he never really made the conscious decision to speak, but he does.

Zorin looks almost surprised, for a moment, that Sanjius has even said anything more to him. His eyes widen the tiniest bit, and he slowly looks up again with an almost wary expression.

“No. It doesn’t,” is all he says, an answer that Sanjius knows he’d give regardless of whether it hurt or not.

But his tone isn’t forceful. He’s said it almost automatically too, a natural response to the question.

It is out of the ordinary for the two of them to interact without confrontation, after all.

He notices how Zorin’s eyes drift to the cloak over his shoulders...

Silence stretches between them for long enough to make it uncomfortable, but still, neither leaves, something compelling them to stay, and that’s when Sanjius finally musters some semblance of courage within him.

“Thank you,” he breathes, focusing eyes on the tiny links of Zorin’s chainmail, because it makes it easier. “I….you saved my life….last night. I’m in your debt.”

With his gaze directed where it is, he sees the slow breath Zorin takes, that breath that tries to be calm but ends up having the slightest tremor to it.

Zorin is such a mystery to him. He doesn’t know his motives for coming to the kingdom. He knows next to nothing about where he came from. The knight is always, without exception, stoic in the prince’s presence.

But this is the first glimpse Sanjius has ever had into Zorin’s mind, the first glimpse of emotion he’s seen from him. And Sanjius has to quickly swallow a lump in his own throat at the thought of Zorin’s face last night, that quick flash of unbridled pain he barely remembers seeing as the knight dragged him away from Brokard’s fallen form.

Zorin is the only one who was there, after all…. He and Zorin are the only ones who saw it happen… This connects them, like it or not.
“There’s no debt to repay,” Zorin replies, interrupting his thoughts in a soft voice Sanjius has definitely never heard him use before.

The prince blinks, finds his eyes drawn upwards to the knight’s, only to see that Zorin is already looking at him.

In fact, he holds his gaze rather intensely for a long moment before he breathes matter-of-factly, “I’ll always protect you, Your Highness.”

But then he seems to become aware of himself and what he’s saying, enough that a bit of sharpness returns to his eyes and he quickly looks away.

He mumbles something about getting back to camp, then strides off to gather Wado and begins leading her away, though Sanjius could swear, as he stares after the two in some semblance of shock, that she nudges him in the right direction with her nose when he starts to drift.

Has this moment really happened?

Is the death of a dear friend really what it’s taken to bring any sort of civility to their relationship?

There are things Sanjius feels he should have asked Zorin, namely why those bandages are still on his arm. He remembers how the swordsman healed overnight after his fights in the training grounds, after all. And surely he would have ripped said bandages off by now if he had.

But for some reason, the impulse to ask had left him as soon as they spoke, and while he doesn’t regret what little he said, there was certainly more on his mind…

It’s not the right moment though.

And for the first time, Sanjius actually feels like perhaps there could be another moment…

He pulls his cloak tighter around his shoulders and follows after Zorin.

Sanji blinked down at the screen, the screen that now rather triumphantly displayed, with a short fanfare, ‘C Rank achieved.’

“You’ve gotta be kidding me….” he hissed, knowing exactly what that usually entailed in games like this.

Somehow, he’d fucking managed to increase the level of his character’s relationship with the dumb knight, and dammit, he hadn’t even been trying to. He’d wandered the woods in search of items, wondering what the fuck he was supposed to do next.

Brook was leaving. Brook was going on tour, and Sanji was almost certain it had to do with his death in this mysterious game of his. Did he experiment? Should he kill someone else off? He didn’t want to lose party members so soon, but---fuck, it was the only way to test his theory.

The problem lied in the fact that, should his theory be true, another of his real friends would walk out of his life…even if he desperately wanted the best for them.

All of this had been on his mind, far more important things. He’d only talked to the mosshead in the game because he’d appeared out of the fucking bushes, and yet, that had gone and leveled up their relationship. Something they couldn’t even do in real life.

Not even after every crazy thing that---
All of a sudden, across the room, the doorknob turned, almost tentatively, and Sanji looked up, with an odd sort of anticipation in his chest, to see none other than Zoro himself step into the room, the other teen’s eyes immediately flicking to Sanji, then down to his 3DS, as he did.

He entered quietly, closed the door behind him, and crossed the room to take a seat on his own bed. But instead of immediately curling up and facing the opposite direction, or rummaging for headphones, he actually stayed facing Sanji, looking like he felt just as hesitant and nervous about the situation.

Sanji sat there silently, waiting to see what Zoro would do.

It took a long moment, but finally, Zoro’s eyes met his.

“Um….so….what’s the deal with that game….?” he asked awkwardly, as if fearing Sanji’s judgment over the simple question. “I mean, if we can both see it….are we insane or is everyone else…?”

The blond resisted the urge to let out a breath of disbelief.

He certainly felt insane, or at least like he was dreaming, considering all that had happened, and the fact that Zoro was really sitting across from him, trying to talk to him properly for the first time since…..ever.

He could easily avoid this, and he certainly felt self-conscious, feeling the intensity of Zoro’s gaze that was equal parts uncertain and somehow hopeful, if he’d correctly identified that emotion behind Zoro’s eyes.

Zoro was not his friend. That was still obvious.

But Sanji couldn’t deny the desire to unload all of this on someone. And if Zoro laughed, well….he supposed the two of them had nothing to lose. Zoro had asked first, and, should he make fun of him, Sanji kicking his ass couldn’t set back a relationship that didn’t exist.

“All my dumb moss brain is never gonna believe me,” Sanji muttered, though it wasn’t a dismissal, and in fact, he couldn’t rid his voice of the vulnerability he felt, no matter how hard he tried.

Zoro seemed to notice this because his lips turned up the tiniest bit, and his shoulders relaxed.

“Try me,” he replied, a challenge in his voice.

A beat, and then Sanji sighed, setting his 3DS aside in preparation for his explanation, the screen still proudly displaying that dialogue box.
SIDESTORY

Despite Zoro screeching at him just earlier that day for apparently being a dick, Sanji didn’t feel any obligation to suddenly act like they were best friends having a sleepover. Even if part of him, deep down, was rather amazed that the algae-brained punk was actually trying to start a conversation here.

And even if another part of him, even deeper down, secretly wanted that conversation to happen---if only so he could start feeling less isolated about this damn game that was driving him crazy.

Zoro was staring at him expectantly, though, as the seconds ticked by, more and more uncertainty creeping onto his features in a way that Sanji didn’t recognize.

In fact, he wasn’t sure he recognized the Zoro that sat across from him, with his legs pulled up and crossed in front of him, picking at his bedsheets with what looked to be nerves rather than indifference.

The Zoro he lived with was always emotionless. He was rude and uncaring about Sanji’s feelings.

Maybe this wasn’t Zoro….maybe the game had done something to him when their “relationship” had leveled up….

And in fact, Zoro wasn’t sure what had come over him either when he entered the room, having finally decided to confront Sanji for better or for worse. At the very least he wasn’t going to sit out in the hallway all night and listen to Sanji mutter to himself.

He wasn’t sure what he’d prepared himself for, but the possibility of an actual conversation had probably been the furthest from his mind. So when Sanji set his 3DS down and leaned forward, actually giving Zoro his full attention, it caused the teen’s heart to do a little flip in his chest.

It must have shown on his face, because Sanji rolled his eyes almost as soon as he’d made himself more comfortable.

“Oh come on, mosshead, what’s with the look?” the blond snarked. “You asked like a human for once. I’m not such a dick that I won’t respond to a civil question that’s not being snarled at me.”

Sanji looked pretty damn pleased with himself for that comment, the teen smirking a little triumphantly.

Zoro supposed he deserved that after snapping at Sanji earlier, but it didn’t stop him from giving a similar eye roll.

“Alright,” Zoro huffed, wanting to drop that subject before Sanji started having too much fun tearing into him. “Just---the game? Luffy and Usopp weren’t just fucking with you? They really can’t see it?”

This had the smug look fading a bit on Sanji’s face, the blond starting to look more unsure.

“No,” he muttered, averting his gaze for a moment before he brought it back to Zoro’s fiercely. “I asked everyone in this damn house about it and no one could! And I swear they were telling the truth, so don’t you dare go laughing about this shit! You think I want you of all people to be the only one to---”

“I’m not gonna laugh,” Zoro interrupted seriously. “Chopper and Luffy especially wouldn’t be able
to resist a new game. And you wouldn’t make up something weird like this.”

Sanji’s mouth, still gaping from his defensive speech, quickly snapped shut, and he looked a little bewildered, certainly shocked, at Zoro’s confident assessment.

“Well….no….I wouldn’t,” he mumbled, eyes narrowing before he shook his head and rid himself of the slightly embarrassed expression on his face. “But that doesn’t mean you should go around telling everyone about it either! This whole thing is getting too….weird for that.”

The feeling of keeping a secret between the two of them was an entirely foreign one for Zoro, and probably for Sanji too, neither quite sure they trusted the other enough, but, Sanji especially, knew he had no choice.

“What kind of game is it?” Zoro eventually asked, before Sanji could get so stuck in his doubts that he’d shut Zoro out entirely again. “I mean, why the hell would only me and you be able to---"

“Don’t you think I wondered that myself?” Sanji snapped suddenly. “It doesn’t make any sense, and the only theories I’ve been able to come up with are---"

“Calm the hell down. I’m not making fun of you, Curly!” Zoro grumbled in return, ironically directing a jab at the other teen's eyebrows, which totally slanted upwards at the ends. But dammit, he wished the blond would quit getting so damn defensive about everything. He didn’t even know why he was.

Maybe it was weird that he was going along with everything, but at this point, he’d decided to believe whatever strange things Sanji told him, if only to stay on his good side.

Sanji let out a frustrated growl and reached up to drag hands over his face with a huff. He looked away for a second and glowered out the window to compose himself.

It was stupid to let himself get worked up over this. He didn’t think he owed it to Zoro to give him the benefit of the doubt. When had Zoro ever proven to be a thoughtful person? But he certainly owed it to himself to try and stay calm and rational about this. He could act mature, more than the idiot mosshead could anyhow.

“I---” he tried again, forcing himself to open up, though he still sounded unsure, almost wary of Zoro’s reaction. “I think---and trust me, I wouldn’t be thinking this if I could come up with any other explanation. But I think---that the game can make---things happen. In the real world…. I don’t think Laboon calling Brook was just good fortune or whatever….”

Zoro’s brow furrowed, but not in dismissal of the idea. It was a weird thing to think, but he knew Sanji was a level-headed guy most of the time. He wasn’t like the younger boys, wouldn’t let himself get swept up in fantasy (unless it was about girls).

“So like…..you’re controlling things? With the game?” Zoro asked slowly, jerking his head towards the 3DS. “You made Laboon call Brook?”

“No, I---I got him killed is what happened. But right after that, Laboon called!” Sanji stammered.

“Wait, back up. You got him killed?” Zoro repeated, raising a brow and tilting his head in confusion. “You mean Brook’s in the game?”

“Yes!” Sanji all but screeched. Now that he’d begun telling Zoro this shit, he wanted to be perfectly understood. “We’re all in the game! It’s literally us---look!”
He then snatched up his 3DS and scrambled off his bed without thinking, nearly tripping when his foot tangled in the bedsheets in his haste.

Sanji was forced to stop short, however, at that line of tape that still split the room in half, split between chaos and order, primitive and civilized, as far as he was concerned. It was only a line of tape, but it was a clear invisible barrier that the two of them had always adhered to.

Zoro’s eyes had widened too, almost in shock that the blond had nearly crossed that border.

They both stayed where they were for a long moment, neither quite sure what to do, until Sanji huffed a breath, adopting a scowl as he looked at the clothes strewn across Zoro’s floor.

“Ugh, your side’s a mess. Just get over here,” he muttered, and gestured Zoro over as he backed up to his bed again.

Zoro’s eyes widened even more, in almost childlike surprise that Sanji had actually offered such a thing. A nervous feeling, unlike any he’d had yet, stirred in his chest, but it was also mixed with an odd sort of excitement.

Maybe it was silly to think so, but there was something significant about this moment, he thought. For the first time ever, Sanji was actually telling him to bridge the gap between them. And it wasn’t to taunt him into a fight….

Slowly, and rather cautiously, Zoro climbed off his bed and padded across the room, hesitating before the tape as if it would shock him when he tried to cross. He still remembered, after all, that time Sanji had expressed his desire to have an invisible fence put through their room instead to ensure the mosshead stayed on his side.

But he crossed the tape, and nothing happened, save for Sanji impatiently patting his bed before he began tapping buttons on his 3DS.

With his heart hammering in his chest and the feeling of heat creeping up into his cheeks, Zoro tentatively took a seat beside the blond.

---

There isn’t enough meat to satisfy Luffient. They’d hardly been able to grab any of their prepared food stores when they’d fled the castle the night before, and that means the only meat available is in the forest itself, the few rabbits Sir Zorin managed to somehow kill while everyone slept.

Sanjius is able to make a simple stew to serve as breakfast, however, using the pots he’d brought from the kitchen, over a small fire Usio and Francus helped set up.

He can only hope the palace chefs, particularly Patriz and Carneades, survived the attack, though he knows they are fully capable of fighting back. They have definitely been known to prevent certain “starving” knights from pillaging the kitchen late at night---usually with knives and fire.

Most of them don’t have much of an appetite, though they eat to appease the prince, and while Sanjius doesn’t have one either, he knows they’ll need their strength.

He uses the meal as an opportunity to observe his friends, to try and distract himself from his own anguish and uncertainty by focusing on those he cares about. If they’re all willing to lay down their lives for him, then he’s going to do all he can to protect them in turn.

Sanjius seats himself on a log with his own bowl, close to Namilia, who’s looking at the trodden ground surrounding the fire ring with exhaustion and barely-contained sorrow.
She still manages to look stunning, her long red hair tumbling in waves over her white cloak. He notes the small braids twisting themselves back from her temple, and he wonders if Robisia has styled them. She often braids Namilia’s hair during times of stress.

Namilia must feel the prince’s gaze on her because her eyes flick to the side and she hastily starts to spoon into her stew, previously neglected as she stared off into space across the camp.

“It’s alright,” Sanjius murmurs. “Take your time.”

Slowly, she lowers her bowl and lifts brown eyes to his, eyes which are puffy and a little bloodshot, the freckled skin around her nose red as well. It’s obvious she’s been crying.

He can count on one hand the number of times he’s seen her in tears, or close to it. And he’s known her since he was nine years old, when she was brought to the castle because of her skill, even at such a young age, with weather magic, not to mention traditional cartography.

It had only been years later that he’d learned her adopted mother had been one of the only female knights in the kingdom’s forces, knighted by his own mother before she’d died. She had been stationed at one of Baratia’s trading outposts, a small island a week’s journey out to sea, following a pirate raid on the small village that had settled there.

Namilia and her adopted sister had both been discovered in the wreckage, some of the few survivors, and they’d been cared for there until their adopted mother had died in the line of duty.

Sanjius wasn’t sure how. Namilia never liked to talk about it. But she’d been brought to Baratia, scared and with the fresh loss of her mother that Sanjius so related to.

They share something special, that came out of something horrible, and Sanjius feels like they often understand each other without having to speak.

This is one of those times, as he conveys his support with his eyes, and she in return.

Usio and Chonrad are seated on the ground nearby, leeching comfort from Luffient and the way he dives into his stew with the same manic vigor as always. He’s almost acting normal, but Sanjius can see it in his eyes, that darkness Sanjius hasn’t seen since the knight lost his two older brothers, or at least received word of it.

The two had departed, newly knighted, several years ago on a mission to help a neighboring desert kingdom from falling to a false tyrannical king, a place that Namilia had always been fascinated with due to its strange weather patterns.

Their ship had never made it past the volcanic Red Dog Sea.

Robisia and Francus are speaking quietly on the other side of the camp, Sir Francus looking far more serious than he has in a long time. Sometimes it’s easy to forget how many years the man has on the rest of them, but now it’s clear. There’s a lot he and Robisia have experienced that the rest of them have no idea about...

He wonders if he should be worried that someone he trusts would keep so much about his own history from him for so long.

But that’s just it. He trusts Robisia and Francus. He knows they would never hide things from him if they were necessary for his wellbeing.

His gaze lingers briefly on Robisia’s blue eyes before averting.
That leaves Sir Zorin, who’s sitting close to Sir Chonrad, tearing into his stew with nearly as terrible manners as Luffient, never one to waste food. The prince supposes he should appreciate this, but it’s almost like watching a carriage wreck with how grotesque it becomes after a minute.

He watches as he foregoes a spoon entirely, practically dumping the contents of the bowl directly into his mouth, slurping it up and then wiping his mouth with the back of a sleeve.

How can a primitive being like him still manage to have such a strong sense of honor and valor? How can that coarse behavior translate to the gentleness he knows the man to be capable of?

In fact, he sees it right there in front of him, when Chonrad looks over at Zorin, the brokenness clear on his face, and Zorin’s gaze softens, his head nodding ever so slightly in silent support that has Chonrad wiping at his eyes automatically and sitting straighter with more confidence.

And then, to his surprise, Zorin’s eyes flick to his, the softness in his gaze lingering instead of disappearing instantly as it normally would when the two look at each other. It’s an intense moment, and he wonders if it hasn’t happened because of the exchange they had in the forest not an hour earlier.

He’s not sure whether it’s something to be uncomfortable about, the fact that it almost feels like Zorin knows what he’s thinking, or the fact that he might be studying him just as he’s studying his knight…

Sanjius looks away first, going back to his stew because he knows their time here is limited. It’s a wonder no one’s come after them yet, and he’s not exactly going to trust the silence of the forest.

He will have to trust that his friends are capable though, capable and ready to face whatever comes...

“Wait, go back to me! I wanna see the swords again!”

“Ugh, you weirdo! I’m not staring at you all day! The purpose of this is to—hey! Get your hands off it! It’s mine!”

“You stared at stupid Nami’s character forever. I just wanna—"

“Zoro! Don’t you dare call Nami stupid! You have absolutely no right!”

Sanji yanked his 3DS far away from the mosshead, wondering when Zoro’s concept of boundaries had become so damn loose as he’d scooted right up next to him on the bed, struggling to see more of the game on-screen.

It was fucking weird, Zoro thought. They were all there in the game, save for Brook, who’d apparently been killed off, and Sanji sure thought it correlated to his good luck with Laboon in real life.

He made a show of scowling and sitting back, deciding to dial down his curiosity, at least outwardly.

“Can’t I at least see the gameplay…?” he asked sulkily.

“No. Look,” Sanji replied with an unnecessary roll of eyes, pulling one leg up and twisting on the bed to face Zoro. “I don’t want to risk having anyone else killed, so no, not yet. I can only control my character in this mode and where the others are positioned. I can shield them too, but that’s it, so if anything happens, it’s—"
“Yeah, but if they die, then something good’s gonna happen,” Zoro interrupted. “So why wouldn’t you wanna kill ‘em off?”

Sanji hated how logical Zoro’s question was. Since when did the mosshead make any sense? But it wasn’t that simple, dammit. It wasn’t that he didn’t want happiness for his friends. It was this stupid worry he had that if they left….he’d be alone.

It was….complicated, and probably selfish, his hesitance. And he didn’t want to admit to Zoro of all people what he was feeling. He wasn’t sure he’d admit it to anyone, but especially not Zoro.

“Because what if I have to beat the game or something!” he justified hastily, not even sure if that theory was true. It was more an excuse he’d come up with than anything. “And if I lose all my fighters at once, my character’s not gonna stand a chance! Robin’s character said that I need to stay alive. I don’t know if that was a hint or what, but I can’t exactly look this shit up on the internet….”

He trailed off and looked away, leaving Zoro to quirk a brow at him, at the way the blond clenched his jaw and tried to hide the clear indecision and worry in his expression.

It was obvious. Sanji wasn’t as good at concealing that shit as he thought, and he probably thought Zoro never noticed.

But he was wrong about that, and maybe Zoro never did anything about it….but it didn’t exactly give him pleasure to have the blond sulking about and closing himself off to everyone.

There was one thing Zoro had to wonder though, given the context of the game, and while he was still a little surprised with himself that he was actually going along with this madness without much evidence, he had to ask, however tentatively.

“What about my interviews…?” he asked carefully, eyes not leaving Sanji. “I’m not dead in the game, but do you think...it was related or...?”

He saw Sanji’s brow furrow, as if he hadn’t even considered it, and Zoro wasn’t sure why but that fucking stung a little. Something had gotten his hopes up, that maybe Sanji had cared enough to think of him when playing this crazy game, but the blond seemed genuinely surprised at the thought.

Eventually though, Sanji turned back to look at him slowly, with a look that certainly wasn’t guilty. In fact, it was kind of smug.

“What about my interviews…?” he asked carefully, eyes not leaving Sanji. “I’m not dead in the game, but do you think...it was related or...?”

He saw Sanji’s brow furrow, as if he hadn’t even considered it, and Zoro wasn’t sure why but that fucking stung a little. Something had gotten his hopes up, that maybe Sanji had cared enough to think of him when playing this crazy game, but the blond seemed genuinely surprised at the thought.

Eventually though, Sanji turned back to look at him slowly, with a look that certainly wasn’t guilty. In fact, it was kind of smug.

“Well, I totally killed your ass in versus mode a couple times,” Sanji said. Then he justified it with, “I was trying to get the hang of the controls before I started the story. You just happened to be the sacrificial meat.”

Zoro felt his eyes narrow, glaring at Sanji balefully as he was so used to doing, mostly to conceal his genuine annoyance. Maybe he deserved a virtual beatdown after his outburst on the beach, but dammit, did the blond really get that much satisfaction out of destroying him?

Perhaps it made sense though, why the interviews had fallen through. If Sanji hadn’t really been playing yet….shit, maybe he was right about this game after all.

“Lemme guess, you’re gonna keep me alive now,” Zoro muttered with more bitterness than intended. “Can’t let anything good happen to me, can you.”

Sanji just glowered at him with irritation.

“Not if you’re an asshole, no.”
Zoro clenched his jaw, then looked away, down to his sock brushing the clean rug beneath Sanji’s bed.

“Fine,” he scoffed, almost in defeat, deciding he wasn’t going to let himself get preoccupied with what Sanji thought about him. He’d wondered if maybe they could actually have a civil conversation, but the blond seemed as guarded as ever. “You’ve at least gotta try someone else though. You should test it or whatever.”

At that though, Sanji’s expression darkened again, and he ran a hand back through his hair with more anxiety than he’d yet shown.

He wasn’t sure if Zoro was aware of the change, but the mosshead detected it, noticing the slight slump in Sanji’s posture.

Again, Zoro narrowed his eyes, but this time, not in frustration.

Was he getting a rare glimpse at the other teen’s insecurities…?

“If anyone’s next, I’m going to help Nami or Miss Robin, but…..I gotta think about it,” Sanji muttered in response. Then his gaze sharpened when he turned it on Zoro again, the blond visibly seeming to shake himself of the uncomfortable silence that had come over him.

“And I wanna go to sleep, mosshead,” he grumbled abruptly, moving off the bed and crossing to his dresser to dig for a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt. “I’ll deal with it tomorrow.”

He took the clothes and his 3DS too, made his way to the door.

Just before he slipped out, he turned around and shot Zoro a pointed look, eyebrows raising and his chin jerking.

“So get off my bed,” he insisted, and Zoro hastily got to his feet, not realizing he’d kept right on sitting there.

As soon as he did, the blond seemed satisfied, and strode from the room, leaving Zoro standing where he was, still on Sanji’s side of the room.

Something was holding Sanji back, which, to Zoro, was dumb considering only good could come out of whatever he did in the game. And if it didn’t work, well…..it wasn’t as if things were so bad here. Not in the slightest.

Sanji was kind, so kind, despite the way he treated him, and Zoro had to figure that, with a little push, he’d get his shit together.

But there was one thing that troubled him. He didn’t want it to trouble him, but it did.

If Sanji had to stay alive, couldn’t die like the rest of them…..wouldn’t that mean nothing good would….?

Zoro shook his head, uneager to get too far ahead of himself when he didn’t even know if this shit was real.

He had to help Sanji test it. Because Zoro had already decided he wanted to be involved.

Only he could see the game. Who else would help him…?
Homeroom was not the place to furiously do one’s homework, and it was not a place Sanji could necessarily concentrate on his homework, not with his classmates milling about and chatting among the rows of desks. It was a thorough distraction from the final problems on his calculus worksheet, his fingers hastily punching buttons on his scientific calculator.

This wasn’t a normal occurrence, doing homework so last minute, but that damn game had kept him from finishing everything the night before.

He fucking hated calc anyway. He studied hard and got good grades, but he knew it would be a useless subject as soon as he graduated and pursued a career in the culinary arts, because he’d already decided on that. He’d do it no matter what it took. If he could take a straight day of cooking class only, he’d be valedictorian for sure.

He had ten minutes to get this shit done, and he wasn’t looking up until then. Neither cute girl nor ugly-ass mosshead was going to distract him.

It was so dumb that he and Zoro were in the same homeroom. Why did their last names have to be so close to each other in the damn alphabet? Why did they even have to be in the same grade? Screw age. He’d gladly move up a grade, even if Zoro was technically older by nearly four months exactly. It was obvious who was the more mature one.

Normally, he didn’t pay the idiot any mind at school, unless they got into a confrontation somehow, and then it was a lucky day indeed if no lockers got dented. It was somewhat of an unspoken rule that they didn’t interact. They didn’t let on about their living situation, and those who had figured it out said nothing, knowing it would spark danger for them, surely.

Sanji was charming and friendly, but, lately especially, he was afraid his tussles with Zoro had damaged his reputation.

This was why he tried to distance himself as much as possible, and he’d thought Zoro had the same common sense.

So why the fuck did Zoro keep staring at him?

Their awful homeroom teacher, Mr. Foxy, had moved the seats around earlier that week, so, unfortunately, Zoro’s seat was in view, a row ahead and a couple seats over. He supposed it wasn’t nearly as bad as when Mr. Foxy had hijacked their detention and made them play dodgeball on the same fucking team, as a “bonding” exercise. Zoro had deemed Sanji the “Ball Man” and used him as a human shield…

And now, the creep kept stealing glances. Through the passing bodies of their classmates, coming into focus between their moving heads, Sanji could feel Zoro’s eyes on him as he tried to write.

He ignored it and pressed on….

...Until two minutes before the bell rang, when he finally set down his pencil and rubbed at his aching hand.

Sanji looked up, directed a sharp gaze at the mosshead, who was still watching him, and hissed, “What?”

Thankfully, none of the other students noticed over their chatter, but that didn’t stop Zoro from looking embarrassed, the bridge of his nose reddening a bit before he shook his head and looked back down.
“Idiot...” Sanji muttered to himself with a huff, stuffing the homework, which was probably riddled with mistakes, into his folder and gathering his books from the metal basket beneath his chair, staring hard at the clock for the final minute, counting down in his head.

He made it to ‘one’ three times from ten, each with growing impatience before, finally, the familiar single-note tone of the bell had everyone standing and shuffling out in the usual herd-like movement to get to their first classes.

Sanji willed Zoro not to linger, quickly flipping up his desk top and standing, resisting the urge to shoulder through a group of jockish guys he never really associated with in his haste to escape the room.

Thankfully, his seat was closer to the door, affording him the chance to slip out and hurry down the hall amid the squeak of shoes on linoleum, the slam of lockers, and the noise of conversation.

Zoro watched him slip out, making no effort to try and catch him, not when the blond didn’t seem to want anything to do with him.

Honestly, he wouldn’t be trying if this whole thing hadn’t been kind of big. He wanted to know what the deal was with this crazy game, but Sanji seemed determined to pretend he was entirely alone in all this, and it was fucking irritating.

For some reason, what Sanji had said last night ran through his mind, about how he would help Nami or Robin, if anyone. It brought a frown to his face and an odd tightness to his chest.

Zoro was positive the blond was kidding himself. He’d help Franky and the other boys too without a thought. But would Sanji really not help him....?

Fuck.

He wasn’t one to complain about his life at all. He took things as they were, and, honestly, right now, things weren’t so bad. Didn’t mean it felt good to think the blond would just abandon him like that.

But he refused to dwell on it, even though the thought had crept into his mind of its own accord.

Instead, he brought himself back to the dull moment he was in, waited until most of the people had filtered out of the room before getting to his feet and picking up the lone biology textbook he had with him.

Zoro had chosen the subject over chemistry, only because he’d thought he’d get to dissect shit. But the day they’d done frogs, he’d gone a little too knife-happy on the thing and was forced to sit out. Who knew they were supposed to document shit about it?

A loud yawn and he too headed from the room before Mr. Foxy could tell him to pull his pants up or scold him for something dumb. Thank fuck he didn’t have any classes with him this year. Every lesson with him seemed to move in slow motion.

The hallway was long, lined by blue lockers and matching blue and white checkerboard tiles along the hall. Already, it was beginning to clear of students as they moved into their respective classrooms, and there was no sign of the blond.

They had no classes together anyway, been actively told by a guidance counselor to choose different gym classes especially. Apparently, their competitiveness had proven to be dangerous for the other kids last year.
The only period they did share was a study hall in the auditorium, but that wasn’t until the end of the day.

A sigh and Zoro started moseying down the hallway, taking his sweet time as he usually did.

It was too bad his biology class was in the opposite direction...

The day slunk by, and as the hours passed, sitting through droning lectures and tedious information, Sanji found himself growing more and more restless, thoughts drifting to his 3DS in his locker, which was practically screaming for him to play from across an entire building and inside his backpack.

Not even French class—-which he loved, largely because of the beautiful student teacher they had now, Mademoiselle Kalifa—-could keep him entirely focused.

By the time his sixth period study hall rolled around, he was actually eager for it, and not for the usual reasons.

Normally, he stole away to the home ec room, provided there wasn’t a class in session. Ms. Laki, also a young, gorgeous angel of a distraction, was always fine with letting him do a bit of cooking during his spare period. There were times she let him use the grills up on the school’s roof, insisting it was nicer to cook under the sky.

But today? All Sanji could think about was that damn game.

He sped through the halls, only slowing to make his daily pitstop at Nami’s locker.

But she wasn’t there, oddly, and she didn’t show, even after a full minute of waiting, during which he’d leaned up there casually, smiling and nodding at a group of freshman girls who walked by, giggling.

Sanji scanned the hall one last time, watching the girls’ bathroom door near the corridor’s intersection a few classrooms down….

Nami was nowhere to be seen, and he wasn’t about to be late, even to study hall, so he reluctantly left her locker, disappointed, and trudged to his own, sneaking his 3DS in between his books and making his way to the auditorium.

Little did Sanji know that Nami had indeed been inside the girls’ bathroom, and he surely wouldn’t have been happy if he had discovered that the person she’d bumped into on the way out had been Zoro.

He’d been sauntering past, on his way to study hall, when she’d emerged from the bathroom, wiping her eyes and not looking where she was going.

They’d collided, and Zoro’s first instinct to grumble at whoever it was hadn’t been impeded upon discovering it was Nami, her short hair looking a little disheveled, especially around her face.

“Watch it,” he mumbled, shooting her a look, and was about to keep moving past. They didn’t interact much at school, after all.

But, surprisingly, she grabbed his arm and pulled him over to the side of the hallway, stopping between two blocks of lockers, shooting glances around her at the lingering kids walking by.
It was definitely odd for her to be seen conversing with him, but it seemed she didn’t much care about her reputation in that moment, especially when Zoro realized, almost with a jolt, how red and puffy her eyes were.

Had she been….crying…?

The realization was so strange, especially considering she hadn’t just brushed past him, that he found himself speechless, staring at her with a wary gaze. Comfort was not something he did well.

“How did you do it, Zoro…?” she asked him quietly, and when confusion colored his features, she rolled her eyes a little. “Oh, come on. You got two interviews this weekend and they both fell through, and yet you’re going around like it didn’t even bother you! How is that possible! Especially now that all this good stuff happened for Brook!”

Zoro scoffed, getting over his shock a bit thanks to her snarky tone.

“Well, gee, rubbing it in like that doesn’t help…” he muttered, glaring at a bunch of guys who gave him weird looks, probably for talking to Nami.

She huffed out a breath, but, to her credit, softened her voice, hugging her books a little closer to her chest, covering the new floral top she’d bragged about buying with Robin just that morning.

“I…..I’m happy for Brook. I am,” she mumbled, averting eyes, and she seemed to be regretting mentioning anything at all, though she bravely continued. “But I just….wish good things would happen to us for a change…”

“Uh…” was his eloquent reply.

But, dammit, he had to wonder where the hell this was coming from. What did Nami have to be upset over? Yes, there was their whole living situation, and they’d miss Brook, but other than that, she was well-liked in school. She was smart (too smart) and good at shit, like...science and geography or whatever. And she and this girl Vivi had been inseparable for a while now, or so he’d thought.

His confusion must have shown on his face, because she sighed and reached out to pat his shoulder, a little condescendingly.

“Alright, Zoro, nice talk,” she said sarcastically, then brushed past him as she started on her way to class again. “Why did I even bother…”

He merely blinked, watching her go for a second and only then thinking of a reply, which he was forced to drop in favor of a lame, “Kay…”

He shook his head to rid his mind of that weird exchange and stalked off himself.

By the time Zoro finally appeared in study hall, he was six, nearly seven minutes late, not that Sanji had noticed. But as it turned out, neither had Mr. Kuzan, who’d sat himself at the table in front of the stage, leaned back and dozed off nearly as soon as he’d half-heartedly called roll.

They were supposed to have assigned seats, among the auditorium rows, with an empty seat in between each person and the next, but the period usually ended with friends sitting next to friends and all sorts of phones and earbuds being pulled out.

The room was huge, and quiet voices and noises got lost easily in the open space, so Sanji didn’t
have a problem sinking down in his chair, folding legs up against the seat in front of him and nestling his 3DS inside of his French book.

What he did have a problem with was the peripheral view of Zoro sliding into his row from the aisle, ratty jeans, old T-shirt, and all.

Sanji ignored it for as long as he could, but the closer those beat-up sneakers came, the harder it was.

He ignored Zoro right up until the guy sank down in the seat next to him, leaned in like the nosy bastard he was quickly becoming and murmured, “You gonna play the game?”

“That’s none of your business if I am,” Sanji hissed back, though he opened his 3DS to do just that, tapping his way through to the main map screen, a sprawling weathered-looking design with various points.

From where his little sprite bobbed, there was a split in the road, and Sanji decided to go with the mountain path, if only because it looked more isolated, and it was farther from the sea, a place he wouldn’t want his little band to be should that horrible father of his decide to send reinforcements.

Zoro gave a snort, and settled down in his own seat, clearly not going anywhere, despite Sanji’s dismissive words.

Again, Sanji decided to ignore him, even as Zoro leaned in a little closer to watch him play.
It isn’t the prince’s business to trouble the people of Midway Village with the tragic news from the capital.

The village is deep in the mountains, secluded, and therefore safe from the terrors surrounding the castle, or so they hope. They’ve only reached it thanks to Namilia’s expert navigation skills, and it’s a wonder they have. Hours of trekking through steep and rocky terrain has left the horses exhausted, used to the relatively flat or gradual slopes of the castle and its surrounding land.

But, naturally, the villagers are extremely curious (not to mention flattered), that the prince himself would be paying them a visit, and lying to his own people or concealing the truth isn’t something Prince Sanjius is willing to do.

So he breaks the news of the palace attack, details their plan to journey to Whole Cakia for reinforcements, and he’s grateful he still has their support, enough that the villagers happily offer supplies, a place to rest, anything that will help the cause.

It’s easy, and when midday rolls around, they are able to have a substantial meal, courtesy of some of the locals, who insist on cooking for them.

It’s no cause for celebration though, and they know, or at least, the more sensible members of their troop know, that they can’t stay long. They must keep moving.
Still, when Sanjius finds himself seated in a place of honor in the tiny town square, his friends with him at a long table set up by the villagers, dining on a simply, but lovingly prepared meal of roast chicken and vegetables, he can’t bring himself to rush, especially when the villagers seem so thrilled to have them there.

He looks around at the square, carpeted with sparsely growing grass, the crude but sturdy fences surrounding the small houses, and the fruit trees dotting the perimeter. There is a well in the center, and though it’s not much compared to what he is used to, it seems the people are happy and faring well, judging by the praises the elderly folk are singing of a bountiful harvest this past year.

His friends seem relaxed, perhaps even more so than they ever are around the palace. He knows most of them come from places like this anyway, and they must feel---

“Excuse me, but you’re awfully quiet, Your Highness.”

The prince blinks to find a man staring at him, a village man with bushy black hair, dark skin, and sleepy eyes, standing across the table from him with a jug in his grasp for refilling drinks. It’s hard to miss the massive red burn scar wrapping around one side of his neck and disappearing beneath his tunic. His right hand is severely burned as well.

Sanjius politely ignores the injuries, quickly adopting a sheepish grin, a little embarrassed to be caught looking off into space as he had been. He’s been trying to look focused and capable as their prince, after all.

“Ah, just….deep in thought is all. I apologize,” he offers, hoping it will be enough to appease the man.

The villager regards him with a passive expression, then replies, “I’m sorry for interrupting you, in that case. Drink?”

He holds up the large jug of ale he carries, and while Sanjius isn’t so sure he should drink too much at a time like this, he finds himself nodding and lifting his ceramic cup for the man to refill.

A sip and a nod of his head to the man. The prince expects that to be it. He expects the man to bow and walk away, but instead, he watches the villager’s eyes drift a few seats down the table to where Robisia is seated. To where, surprisingly, her gaze lifts to meet the man’s, widening for a second as if in surprise before narrowing, a strange, icy tension passing between them.

Do they….know each other…?

But Sanjius barely has time to wonder this before the moment quickly passes, and the man shifts his attention back to the prince.

“This kingdom has seen its fair share of turmoil,” the man muses. “Most of it before your time, but nonetheless, we always press on.”

Sanjius can’t help the seriousness that comes over his expression. It’s difficult to avoid when he’s hardly been able to keep his mind from falling right back into that terrifying hour when he truly believed his kingdom to be falling apart.

Perhaps this man is attempting to comfort him. He knows his people are resilient. But this man didn’t see what he saw, surely. This man didn’t see one of his closest comrades fall before his very eyes.

But then again…those burns on his skin. Maybe he shouldn’t be so quick to judge…
“There is truth to that,” Sanjius replies eventually, keeping his voice down. He does not wish to show vulnerability at a time like this. “I can’t say what’s ahead, but I’m choosing to remain optimistic for the sake of the kingdom.”

His words sound hollow, as with so much of his speech all day. But he doesn’t feel like himself, and he can sense the same gravity within his friends, though some are much better at hiding it than others.

The villager seems to regard his words lazily, and the pause is so long, Sanjius wonders if he’s going to end the conversation there.

But when he finally speaks, the tilt of his head seems almost curious.

“There was once a prediction made by a very young witch,” he says. “She predicted a great change in power for this kingdom, and sure enough, your father’s reign began not long after. I wonder if such a prediction could be made again.”

Sanjius raises a brow, his eyes narrowing. Witches and those with scrying abilities are becoming more and more common throughout the kingdom. But he’s never heard of such a witch, nor of such a grand premonition.

He knows the power of prediction. He sees Namilia use it every day, but for one person to seal the destiny of an entire kingdom?

As its ruler, he can’t be so quick to accept it.

“Surely Baratia can form its own fate,” he replies. “And as it is, if such a great witch exists, I have yet to hear of her stepping forth in the kingdom.”

The man shrugs, casts his gaze, oddly, to the dense green forest that lies beyond the edge of the village.

“Well, it’s been many years,” he says, lifting a hand to rub at the back of his head. “The lake I think….down the wooded path….that was where I last…”

But he stops himself, shaking his head and yawning slightly.

“It’s been many years,” he repeats, then flicks his gaze down to Sanjius’ drink. “Would you like that chilled?”

He doesn’t wait for an answer, just reaches out to wrap his hand around the prince’s cup, which immediately develops condensation around its glazed exterior. Only when the top of the liquid begins to ice over does the man pull his hand away.

“Ah, forgive me. Little too much,” he notes.

A last glance to the prince, and he raises two fingers in a little wave before walking off to disappear into the crowd of villagers milling about in the square.

Sanjius stares after him for a long moment, then looks at the small chips of ice quickly melting over the surface of his drink. The result of magic…

Does he trust that man…?

He doesn’t even know who he is. Nor does he necessarily want to believe in or resign himself to
anything this fortune teller he speaks of has to predict.

And yet, he wants to know that they can overcome this. His curiosity practically screams out, vying for supremacy over his caution.

He curses his uncertainty, uncertainty that should not be present in a dependable royal.

Sanjius is still cursing it when, not a half hour later, he is riding Siren out of the village, down the path that leads deep into the forest, the path that begins to show less and less signs of use the deeper they go.

He doesn’t know how long he will be. The man he’d spoken to seemed to have conveniently vanished from the village altogether following the end of the meal. But if this sidequest to find this witch proves to be more extensive than previously imagined, he vows to return to the others. They mustn’t linger in one place for long, he knows.

“Is your arm alright…”

Sanjius hears Namilia’s voice as her horse, Mikan, walks a few paces behind him, those hooves stepping lightly over the dirt path, compared to the heavy clomp of Wado’s.

She’s talking to Zorin, and the prince hears the low, passive grunt he gives, practically hears the shrug of his shoulders.

Honestly, the idiot has no idea how to converse with anyone, let alone a beautiful woman, and Sanjius has to wonder why he’s brought him along.

They were able to slip away while Luffient suffered his well-known food coma, Francus and Robisia promising to keep an eye on things, Usio and Chonrad included, as the last of their supplies from the villagers were gathered, though Robisia seemed conflicted and advised he tread with great care.

Namilia was an easy choice after that. Her skill with predictions of her own sparked her interest to hear what this witch has to say, but Zorin?

It’s not clear at all why he wanted to come, especially considering the ample supply of ale in the village that should have kept him there.

But then again, Zorin’s been acting strangely all day. There have been a few times Sanjius has looked up only to find Zorin watching him already. If the foolish knight thinks he needs extra protection, or, worse yet, thinks he’s weak…

Just because Brokard is gone….

Damn it all, he doesn’t want his mind to sink there again. There’s no time to grieve. Not yet.

“Your Highness, you’re muttering to yourself.”

“What?” Sanjius blurs out with a start, realizing Namilia has come up beside him and they’re a good number of paces between where he’d last noticed them walking, the moss-covered fallen tree he’d noticed on the side of the path no longer in sight. So much for his knight rejoining his kin...

“I said you’re muttering to yourself,” she repeats, shooting a look back at Zorin when he gives a snort of amusement from where Wado walks on her opposite side, the knight’s arm resting on his swords as he surveys the surrounding forest. Thankfully, Zorin brought his more even-tempered
"My apologies," he replies, trying to smile a little. "I suppose I'm just a little anxious to hear what this woman has to say, given….well….everything. If we can even find her, that is..."

"If there’s truly anyone out here, we’ll find them," Namilia assures, though she doesn’t seem particularly comfortable with their surroundings judging by the uneasy glances she keeps shooting towards the trees. “One of the villagers showed me a map. The path continues the two miles straight to the lake. After that it's a dead end.”

Her gaze falls to the path before them, which is becoming more and more unkempt, more overgrown. The horses’ paces are much more tentative as the weeds grow taller.

It doesn’t make sense. Why would a path to a freshwater lake, such an easy source of water for the village, be so abandoned?

“Who the hell is this witch hiding from?” Zorin grumbles, nudging Wado ahead of them and drawing a sword to slice at some low-hanging branches that obstruct the narrowing path. “Feels like the forest itself is tryin’ to keep people out.”

“Maybe I was right to bring you then,” Sanjius shoots back. “Our very own plant interpreter.”

“I’ve seen you fumble around with a blade,” Zorin growls in reply, ignoring his comment and turning to glare back at the prince. “I’m the only one with any hope of cutting us through here.”

An odd keening noise sounds from amongst the trees, something that pricks the horses’ ears, causes Namilia to whip her head to the right as she senses a slight shift in the atmosphere.

“It may not be my weapon of choice, but at least I have the ability to use it if I need to!” Sanjius retorts, pressing heels into Siren’s side so she levels her pace with Wado.

Another strange noise, this time, an almost otherworldly clicking.

Mikan side-steps closer to the center of the path.

A dark flash darting between tree trunks.

Namilia sucks in a breath.

“A sword isn’t a kitchen knife! Improper form will get you killed in battle!”

“Your Highness…”

“I’m not using one in battle if I can help it! My feet are more than enough to defeat anyone I need to! Even you!”

Mikan gives a low nicker of warning, the other two horses showing signs of alarm too.

“Your Highness!”

“I’m your knight for a reason! Because I’m stronger than you! That’s how it’s supposed to be!”

Another darting shadow. Namilia’s head whips around again.
“Well, perhaps we should test this! Do you really think you can beat me, Zorin?”

A louder screech.

“I’ll prove it to you right here---!”

The brief singing of a sword. Zorin quickly speeds Wado up to cut off Namilia’s horse, nearly shoving her into Siren as he clashes blades, suddenly, with a jagged sword.

The prince’s eyes move from said sword to the skeletal hands that grip it, finally focusing fully on the ghostly, bony wraith that’s practically flown out of the trees to attack Zorin, its jaw gaping, a purple mist undulating from its form like flames.

Sanjius turns Siren hard to block Namilia as well, pushing her behind him, just before another wraith shoots out of the forest, forcing him to draw his own sword from its sheath to stop its attack. It’s ironic, but it’s all he can do to defend from atop his horse.

The wraiths push off the blades with surprising force considering what little real mass their unearthly bodies seem to have, landing on the path a few paces in front of the three.

It’s not long before another---damn it all---five begin to emerge slowly from the underbrush, leaving the three of them thoroughly outnumbered.

Sanjius glowers at the obstruction with menace because all he sees in them are the creatures that took down Brokard and he refuses to let that happen again to any of his friends.

“Namilia!” he calls back to the redhead, not taking his eyes from the wraiths as he turns Siren to bar her way forward entirely. “Go back to the village! Warn the others! There could be more!”

“What?!” she immediately protests. “But---what about---!”

“We’re fine! Go! We’ll take care of these!” Sanjius replies gruffly, and risks one glance back at her to implore his adamance.

“I can help!” she cries, pulling Mikan around when the mare dances nervously on the spot. “I leave and it’s two against seven!”

“Go!” Sanjius insists again, barely concealing the concern in his voice. If she stays and anything happens to her, he’ll never forgive himself. At least Zorin’s job is to fight...

Her eyes narrow angrily, despite her own fears, because after all that’s happened, she does not want this to be the last time she sees the two alive.

But that look on the prince’s face is fierce, and Zorin is already sliding down from his horse with swords drawn and his eyes focused intensely on the targets ahead.

Namilia lets out a frustrated noise, closes her eyes, but eventually concedes, yanking the reins hard and turning Mikan away from the fight.

As a last attempt at assisting them, she pulls her staff from her belt, points it at the wraiths and shoots a protection spell outwards, knocking the enemies backward onto the ground with the staggering pulse of white light.

Satisfied with the opening she’s given them, she calls out, “Don’t you dare get killed!”
Then she gives Mikan a kick and starts her galloping off towards the village again.

A huge sense of relief crashes through Sanjius as soon as she does, especially when he hears the clashing of blades again as the quickest-recovering wraith attacks Zorin directly.

As soon as Namilia’s billowing white cloak and the orange chestnut hide of her mare are out of sight, the prince slides off his horse as well, just in time to meet the sword of another wraith with the hardened armor of his shinguard.

His horse whinnies, but stays close with loyal determination, as does Wado, and Sanjius feels his confidence grow when he sees the wraith Zorin is fighting evaporate in a cloud of mist after a particularly hard blow of his swords.

Zorin glances his way, almost to share in his triumph as there’s a smirk on his face just before he pulls his third sword from its sheath and clamps the hilt between his teeth.

Sanjius can’t help but give a little scoff. But it’s an amused scoff, and when he lunges for his own wraith, it’s with the desire to prove to Zorin, and also to himself that he’s capable of fighting. He’s capable of defending himself and those he cares about. He won’t lose anyone else.

And when, not long after, he and Zorin stand, both panting from exertion, watching the last of the seven wraiths disintegrate into nothingness, he is certain he can uphold this desire.

The prince flicks his hair, straightening his collar and getting himself back into some semblance of order, his legs still vibrating with the pleasant rush of energy he always gets after a good spar.

Zorin is sheathing his swords, and his gaze automatically meets the prince’s. Sanjius sees it drift up and down his form, as if checking for injury, though he ultimately seems satisfied to see the prince is fine.

“I’m tougher than those wraiths,” the knight boasts, lips slowly quirking upward, along with an eyebrow. “Still think you can beat me?”

Sanjius must work hard to keep a similar grin from his face, surely brought about by his relief and the excitement of a fight.

“Sure,” he asserts. “But would it really be honorable to fight someone who looks as exhausted as you?”

Zorin is about to retort. But then, the horses nicker behind them, a split second before a smooth female voice chuckles.

Both Sanjius and Zorin can’t help but startle as, on the path in front of them, a tall, dark-haired woman wearing a purple cloak materializes before them.

For a moment, Sanjius thinks it’s Robisia, but when she lowers her hood, the woman’s hair is chin-length, falling heavily over one eye. She holds a pipe in one graceful hand, and she takes a casual puff as she watches the two men.

Instantly, they’re on guard, Zorin with a grip on his swords once more, but she merely holds up a hand.

“Calm yourselves,” she says. “I mean you no harm.”

The men aren’t convinced, however, the two sharing a glance before Zorin huffs out, “Was it you
who summoned those wraiths?”

She sighs, crossing an arm over her chest.

“I don’t summon them,” she replies. “They exist here. They only attack those who’ve set foot upon their territory.”

“You mean the forest?” the prince asks, still wary.

The woman shakes her head, smiling slightly.

“No. Death is their territory. Now come,” she says simply before turning on her heel, looking back at the two over her shoulder. “Or are you no longer interested in my predictions, Your Highness?”

The prince’s eyes widen briefly in surprise, but he shakes the look just as quickly, watching her with caution.

“You’re the witch…?”

The woman lets out an exasperated breath and quirks a brow.

“Sharlille,” she replies, blue eyes studying them for another moment. Then she starts off down the path once more.

Zorin and Sanjius exchange another look, but they have no choice other than to follow, neither noticing the second pair of blue eyes that peek out to watch them from behind a tree not far away.

A small upturn of lips, a flash of pink hair. A woman’s body transforming silently into a purple cecropia moth that flutters away.

And there may as well have been no one there at all.

“That’s---are you fucking kidding me?!” Sanji hissed, watching as the scene on his screen faded to black and took him back to the map where his little character sprite bounced over the forest.

A newly added dotted line followed the sprite of the mysterious witch to a farther point on the map.

“What!” Zoro growled back. “You’ve gotta be kidding me! You had the perfect shot to sacrifice Nami to those wraiths and you didn’t fucking take it!”

“Shut up!” Sanji snarled, giving Zoro’s shoulder a shove. The creeper had leaned in way too close for comfort to watch him play... “I told you I’m not---ready for that shit yet! That’s not even what I’m---didn’t you see the witch? That’s her! That’s the lady who sold me the game!”

“We’re all in it, Curly,” Zoro replied, sitting back in his seat and sulking. “Even Mr. Kuzan was there.”

“So you don’t think it’s strange?” Sanji nearly shrieked, actively having to keep his voice down, given their location. “How the fuck can any of us be there! Don’t you want answers to all of this?!”

“What I want is for you to quit being so damn timid about it and kill someone else off already!” the mosshead insisted. “Who cares how it works! It’s a thing, so let’s see if it does work!”

The blond made a thoroughly frustrated noise, just as the final bell of the day unexpectedly chimed in the background, neither aware that the period had passed by in its entirety.
He took that opportunity to snap his 3DS shut, gather his books and get to his feet.

“It’s my game, and I want answers!” he insisted stubbornly, glad for the height he’d gained on Zoro by standing. “I’m going back to the game shop. That lady has to know something!”

Zoro quickly stood as well, matching Sanji’s height.

“I’m going too!” he asserted.

“Like hell you are, mosshead!” Sanji shot back, wishing he could shove the idiot right back down.

“You just said you don’t care how it works!”

“I don’t. But if you go by yourself, who knows what kind of dumb decisions you’re gonna end up making!”

“What do you mean? The only one capable of making dumb decisions is---!”

“Voice down, Sanji Vinsmoke.”

The interruption of a third voice forced the two teens to tear stabbing glares away from each other to see Mr. Kuzan standing in the aisle between the seats, rubbing at the back of his head and yawning sleepily.

“But Mr. Kuzan, he---!” Sanji yelped.

“Mr. Vinsmoke. School’s over. Don’t you have better places to be?”

And with that, the man wandered off slowly towards the auditorium doors, holding his clipboard and mumbling something unintelligible as he went.

Sanji growled in his direction, then turned his anger back to Zoro, who had a rather smug look about his face thanks to his avoidance of the scolding.

“Had enough yet?” Zoro said. “Why don’t you just---”

“You too, Mr. Roronoa.”

A wince and he found himself glowering at Mr. Kuzan’s back as well.

“Had enough yet?” Sanji crowed right back.

“Ugh,” Zoro grumbled, for lack of anything better to say as Sanji began to push past him to the aisle, even though he was perfectly capable of going the opposite direction.

By now they were the last ones in the auditorium, and for some reason, Zoro began to feel a strange tightening in his chest when the overhead lights lowered and the cavernous space began to dim.

He watched Sanji make his way partway up the gently sloping aisle, and when he, surprisingly, stopped and turned to look back at Zoro, face low-lit by the warm aisle lights, Zoro felt himself swallow hard.

“Look,” the blond said slowly, as if working up to his own words. “If you’re gonna be such an annoying ass about it, then meet me at my locker in fifteen minutes. We’ll go together. I’ll give you a thirty second timeframe, and if you don’t show, then it’s tough luck for you---”

“Oi, thirty seconds?! What the hell!” Zoro screeched.
“Just get there on time and it won’t be an issue,” Sanji replied, smirking devilishly as if he didn’t expect Zoro to manage such an impossible task.

Unfortunately, that look about his face and the way he flicked his hair arrogantly before striding off had the other teen’s throat go dry, enough that he had to look away and swallow again to help remedy it.

Fuck.

Was he actually going to admit to himself that the blond had looked attractive standing there in the low lighting with his stupid preppy polo shirt and his stupid floppy hair and that stupid crooked smile?

He shook his head and stalked up the aisle too, completely bewildered by the fact that he was going to admit that…and that was weird as fuck.

Sanji’s little challenge shouldn’t have been a problem for any normal person, but, knowing the mosshead’s terrible sense of direction, he knew it would be all but impossible for Zoro to pull off.

And that was the point, so he could lose him and go to the game shop alone.

Fifteen minutes passed, during which Sanji tracked down Usopp and told him where he was off to. Then he headed to his locker, packed up his backpack and checked his phone for the time.

Zoro had twenty seconds to show up, and he contemplated bolting right then and there. But, he always fought fair, and so he remained at his locker, shifting his gaze to one of the hallway clocks on the wall so he could track the exact seconds.

He was so preoccupied with staring at the second hand, watching as the red bar slid fluidly towards the ‘6’ on the clock face, that he didn’t notice Zoro had come up beside him until he triumphantly pushed off his locker to leave.

“Shit!” he yelped in alarm at the mosshead’s smirking face. “What the hell!”

“I scare you?” Zoro asked with an infuriating grin, black backpack thrown lazily over one shoulder, skateboard shoved under an arm.

“No!” Sanji shot back automatically, making a flustered sound and blowing some hair out of his eyes. “I just---what are you doing here??”

“Meeting you, what else?” Zoro replied, shrugging. “You said to meet you here.”

“Yeah, but---! But---!” the blond stammered, before hissing out, “How are you here??”

“I walked,” Zoro said, quirking a brow and staring at the other teen like he’d lost his marbles. “What, never heard of it? It’s a thing that humans d---”

“Okay, okay, shut up! Let’s just go!” Sanji huffed, flailing hands around before turning on his heel and starting off down the hallway at a brisk pace.

Zoro grinned to himself and set out after him, hoisting his backpack up a bit.

It was true. He’d just walked here and got here on time. The hallways hadn’t changed on him this time, so it was a hell of a lot easier to get where he was going. He just…got there, but if it sent the blond into a tizzy, then that was a plus. At least Sanji wasn’t ignoring him entirely today.
He wasn’t being nice either, but the fact that they’d interacted more that day than they had in probably…ever? That felt pretty damn good, even if they were arguing and bitching at each other. However reluctantly, Sanji was still including him in shit.

So Zoro found himself in a pretty good mood as he followed Sanji from the building, not even straying as he kept his eyes on Sanji’s back, watched his shoulders tense as he repeatedly grumbled to himself like he was so prone to doing.

He really was insane.

They still didn’t talk once they were out on the road, Sanji on his bike and Zoro on his board, but Zoro was content to let Sanji ride along ahead of him because he actually wasn’t trying to shake him off his trail. He rode fast, but Zoro noticed the glances he kept stealing over his shoulder to make sure he was still following, which was absolutely a change from just the day before.

The game shop was a little farther from their school than it was from Sunny, the ride taking them through neighborhoods that were far more wooded than theirs, their wheels rolling over fallen Spanish moss on the sidewalk.

It was shadier at least, more comfortable than if the sun had been beating down on them as it did by the ocean, especially when they cut through the local college, where pedestrian walkways were abundant.

Maybe Zoro didn’t wander physically for once, but his mind certainly did, his thoughts drifting to the look he’d seen on Sanji’s face when he’d removed Nami from his team in the game. He’d hesitated there, before starting the fight, with the option to take Nami’s character into battle or not.

It had been his fucking chance. He could have tested his theory.

But he hadn’t. And, in fact, the look he’d had was the same look of minor despair and indecision that had marred his features when Brook told them his news.

Was Sanji really that scared of being alone? Would it really be enough to stop him from helping others, something that Zoro knew was practically ingrained into his very soul?

“Whoa, sorry!” Sanji called out suddenly, his bike swerving unexpectedly to the side, forcing Zoro to do the same so he avoided hitting the college woman they’d both nearly taken out when she walked out from around the corner of a building.

Zoro resisted throwing some choice words at the girl for getting in the way, but he and Sanji kept moving off down the street, leaving her to stare after them in a bit of shock.

She brushed a lock of pink hair away from her face, gaze following the two curiously as they rode off, because she’d seen, even in that brief moment, the one boy’s blue eyes that matched hers, the blond hair that flopped over half his face….just as his used to…

“…Sanji…?” she breathed quietly before she could help herself, even though surely it was impossible. She hadn’t seen her younger brother in years, not since they’d been removed from their father’s home and separated. She didn’t know where he’d been taken.

Reiju shook her head and kept walking to her toxicology class.

But, try as she might to forget it, the image of that boy on the bike would stick with her for the rest of the day...
Sanji wanted answers from Sharley, but he was also scared to get them. Actually, he was terrified, and he hated that he was when Zoro seemed so damn confident about it all.

He knew he shouldn’t let that eat at him though. Zoro wasn’t even the one playing, after all, so he could screech all he wanted about killing people off. It was easy for him to say. He wasn’t the one responsible for anything that happened. Sanji didn’t care if the results might very well be positive in the end.

Having that much power, that much command over other people’s lives? It was scary, and he had to wonder why the hell he was a prince of all things in the game when he hardly felt that assertive in real life.

He tried to keep his mind from racing as fast as his bike tires as they finally rolled up to the shopping complex, Zoro, surprisingly, having managed to stay behind him the whole time. It was kind of unsettling how magnetized he seemed to be all of a sudden…

The blond hopped off his bike outside the game store, checking his backpack to make sure he still had the game with him. Then he clipped his helmet to his backpack loop, locked his bike, and reluctantly turned to look at Zoro, who’d stood there waiting, looking more and more exasperated the longer Sanji took.

“Finally ready?” Zoro asked, to which Sanji rolled his eyes and pushed past him to the door, pulling it open and striding in ahead of him into the air conditioning.

The game store side was empty, though there were a few people visible through the archway to the Mermaid Café, sitting quietly at tables with their drinks, reading or working on laptops amidst the relaxing tropical music.

It was peaceful, and yet Sanji stormed through the aisles of games, right up to the counter, where he slammed hands down on the glass case, rattling a few Amiibos within, but dammit, he didn’t care. Sharley was seated on a stool behind it, an elbow resting on the counter as she clicked through the computer, gaze fixed on the screen.

It was only when Sanji cleared his throat pointedly that she finally allowed a knowing smirk to come to her lips. Her eyes flicked to Sanji, a look of bewildered fury on his face and Zoro standing behind, perusing a rack of games, not even paying the blond any mind.

“Told you!” Zoro yelped at him anyway. “I told you she had to know!”

“Yeah, yeah,” Zoro muttered.

“Know what?” Sharley asked teasingly, still with that smirk, and when Sanji spluttered in protest because she should absolutely know, she chuckled.
“You’re going to make me close up shop, aren’t you~” she said, then pushed back from the counter and got to her feet.

From there, she left Sanji where he stood, crossing to the front door where she flipped the ‘open’ sign around. She pulled shut the glass doors between the café as well before rejoining the two boys.

“It’s a shame Hawkins isn’t in today,” she said as she moved behind the counter again and gestured for Zoro and Sanji to follow her through the open doorway to the back. “I’m sure he would have taken interest in your reactions.”

Zoro and Sanji shared a look, and though Sanji suddenly seemed hesitant again, Zoro just shrugged and headed after her, leaving the blond no choice but to go too.

Sanji didn’t know what he’d been expecting behind that door. Probably a storage room, or a bare-bones break area.

But what they walked into was quite the opposite.

The room was furnished as much of the Mermaid Café was, walls painted pink, light fabrics and nautical netting draping down from the ceilings and walls. There was an arrangement of plush couches facing a flat-screen TV. A door near the corner of the room led outside, serving as a back entrance to the shop.

Sanji saw a sleek black car parked out the window, and behind that, the waving of tall reeds, a small raised wooden walkway disappearing into them, most likely to the beach beyond.

Normally, he’d be excited about a beautiful woman inviting him into a private back room, but given all that was assaulting his mind, he could only feel the flutter of nerves for an entirely different reason.

“Have a seat,” Sharley said, gesturing to the couches as she herself moved to the side of the room, to a longer table upon which sat an electric burner plugged into the wall and a ceramic teapot which still steamed, as if she’d been waiting for them all along.

“Tea?” she asked, to which Zoro immediately replied, “No,” rather rudely, already plopping himself down on the cushiest couch, dropping his backpack and skateboard onto the floor unceremoniously and making himself comfortable.

Sanji glared at Zoro for the brute’s utter lack of manners before answering, “If you’re making it, sure. Thank you.” Not without another pointed look at the other teen to teach him how politeness was done.

He moved to take a seat too on a perpendicular couch to Zoro’s, taking off his backpack and setting it on the floor much more quietly next to his feet.

Silence stretched over the room then, save for the soft ticking of a seashell-framed clock on the wall and the pouring of water as Sharley prepared the tea.

The woman didn’t seem to mind the quiet and neither did Zoro, leaning back on the couch like it was his own, but Sanji found himself unable to relax, shifting about awkwardly until finally he had to break the silence.

“So this game….is real?” he asked, even though he’d seen ample proof that it was. “I’m not just---imagining all this?”
“Of course it’s real,” Sharley replied over the clinking of a spoon against ceramic before she moved away from the table and carried over two cups of tea, one for Sanji, and one for herself, setting them down on the low coffee table between the couches.

She settled herself on the couch across from Sanji’s, crossing one leg behind the other and sitting rather regally as she sipped her warm drink.

“What would you like to know?” was her next question, to which Sanji nearly spluttered himself to death.

“Wh--well---everything!” he yelped, ignoring the smirk that came over Zoro’s face, the other teen stifling a laugh at Sanji’s reaction. “I don’t---I mean---what is it?! How is every character someone I know?! How is---is it---magic or---how can it be possible?! What happens if---?”

“Logue Town,” Sharley interrupted calmly, the curve of her lips partially obscured by her cup. “It’s said to be the place of beginnings and endings. Do you know why?”

Again, Sanji looked entirely baffled by Sharley’s direction of the conversation, but he tried. He tried to compose himself and listen to what she had to say, despite the many questions all trying to burst forth from his mind at once.

“I---no,” he huffed, shaking his head. “What does that have to do with---?”

“There is a legend in this town, from when it was first founded centuries ago,” she interrupted again, and this time, Zoro did lose himself to his snickers as Sanji couldn’t help but throw up arms and flop back in frustration.

Sharley’s smirk stayed firmly on her face.

“It was a port town, as it is now,” she said. “A crossroads of land and sea that saw many visitors. Journeys commenced and journeys concluded here. It became a place for trading and selling goods from all over the world, and the legend tells of a man who came to town on a ship no one had ever seen before. He carried wares that he claimed were from a city of gold---a city whose people did indeed possess powers not of this world. Angels, in a way.”

She paused to take another drink, naturally right at the moment when her story began to sound the least credible.

Sanji couldn’t keep the disbelief from his face, but he kept quiet, knowing he probably shouldn’t have so much skepticism towards anything anymore, given the whole situation.

“He brought with him a strange card game,” she eventually continued, eyes watching Sanji the whole time. “A game that would allow the player to take control of their fate, and the fates of those most dear to them. Indeed he’d seen it happen firsthand, he claimed, as it had helped him return to the world as we know it.

Of course, no one believed him. In fact, he said the cards changed to depict pictures of real people, but they appeared blank to everyone but him. He was called a liar and mocked for his apparent insanity.”

Again, she stopped for some tea, but Sanji’s impatience was growing, especially given the fact that Sharley had just described something so close to what he was going through without even knowing.

Sanji couldn’t resist blurt ing out, “So, what? It’s the same thing?” He pointed insistently at Zoro. “This guy can see my game too though!”
Sharley held up a hand to indicate she had more to say, forcing Sanji to hold his tongue yet again. He stole a glance at Zoro, who looked, by contrast, quite bored with the whole story, his arms crossed over his chest, staring off into space blankly.

How the hell could he be so disinterested at a time like this?

“This traveler—Noland was his name—was eventually driven from town, his reputation as a liar brewing disdain amongst the people. A shame, considering I believe the tale to be true,” Sharley said, clearly not letting Sanji rush her story.

“But before he left, he dropped the game into the ocean, expressing his hope that it would reappear and work its magic for anyone most in need of change—or that it be lost forever. Since then, that game was not the last, or so I’ve heard. It seems you may have unearthed the latest incarnation. It’s the first I’ve seen, so I’m terribly intrigued~”

The blond let out a breath, gripping at the edge of the couch, looking ready to fall right off it with his own thirst for answers.

“If you’ve never seen it, how do you know about it?” he asked. “Or—why do you even believe in it...”

She merely shrugged and gave an enigmatic little smile.

“I grew up with that story. Haven’t you ever read it? Noland the Liar? And let’s just say I’ve also dabbled in my share of the occult. The supernatural is something of a passion of mine. I know this world isn’t without its fair share of mysticism.”

Sanji snapped his jaw shut, a little embarrassed that he hadn’t heard of such a story before, but he supposed it was no wonder. He hadn’t had access to many books growing up, given his home life with his father...

He sighed, trying to make sense of everything she’d told him, as unbelievable as it was.

“But—if—the game is only visible to the player—I’m the one playing, so why can he see it?” was his next question, the blond jerking a thumb at Zoro again, who yawned helpfully.

Sharley chuckled, tilting her head a bit as she studied the odd pair.

“That is peculiar,” she admitted. “But the game, I’m afraid, appeared to him first, if you recall, not you~ The fact that you ended up playing instead, I suppose, created a special case.”

“I—” Sanji stuttered, feeling his face heat for some reason, especially when Zoro’s attention focused, and the mosshead quirked a brow at Sharley.

“I don’t have a 3DS,” Zoro stated, as if he’d just explained the whole conundrum.

“I see,” Sharley replied, giving a nod of her head.

Sanji rolled his eyes.

Sharley smiled in response.

“You don’t seem terribly thrilled about all of this,” she noted, watching him curiously. “What effect has the game had?”

The blond huffed out a breath, unsure why he flicked eyes to Zoro again, but he did, the mosshead
noticing and giving him a look that basically implored him to spill everything.

So, despite his concerns of just a day ago, he sighed and slowly began to explain.

“The game---I’m in it, and all of the people I live with are in it. And---it’s all a fantasy world, but---one of my friends got killed in the game and---well, right after that, something amazing happened to him in real life. It’s---crazy, but---you’re even in it. You’re apparently this---this psychic witch, and…”

He trailed off, knowing it all sounded absurd, but Sharley’s eyes merely widened slightly and she leaned forward with interest.

“A psychic witch~” she mused, liking the sound of that. “So death in the game causes something good in our world? I’m not sure how that makes much sense, but…”

Sanji huffed out a breath, feeling a bit of embarrassment creep up within his chest. There was more to the significance, he thought, but it would mean explaining his living situation to a complete stranger, something he was never keen on doing. He hadn’t even told this lady his name, he realized, to make matters worse.

“I....we....we live…”

Sanji shot a look at Zoro, as if to stall, but the mosshead just rose brows, silently questioning why he didn’t just tell her. The blond sighed, forcing down his anxiety over the matter.

“We live….in a group home,” he muttered. “Like...none of us have parents in the picture or whatever so….the good news for our caretaker meant he’s gonna leave us….”

A silence followed, though Sharley didn’t seem to judge. She looked curious, her expression indicating the deeper thought she put into his explanation, but she said nothing about it, merely replied, “I see. He’s leaving your life in both senses. Interesting…”

“Yeah…I haven’t tested it on anyone else yet, but….yeah,” Sanji muttered, averting his gaze to the decorative seashells that filled a jar on the coffee table beside his neglected cup of tea.

His brow furrowed deeply as he mulled over what he’d been thinking about---even fearing---now that it seemed all of this was real, somehow. It was something selfish, and he’d probably get a fucking earful from Zoro about it if he mentioned it.

But, as it stood, these two were, strangely, the only ones who had any clue about this crazy situation…

“I just....if I want to help them all, I have to stay alive in the game. I’m the player---I’m the one in control,” he said, still fixated on the curves and shapes of those shells, all tossed and molded by the sea. Where would he be tossed if what he feared came true…?

“I have to stay alive,” he repeated quietly, sounding almost resigned now. “I have to see it through to the end…. But if I do, will anything happen for me…? If I survive and help my friends....they’ll be free, but will I? And if my character dies, it’s game over, isn’t it. Anyone still alive will be stuck instead...because I can’t play with a party of one. I tried.”

He trailed off, the thoughts said out loud seeming to hit him harder than they had inside his head. He didn’t know what the hell he was supposed to do. Just that it was going to hurt no matter what he did, and if he did nothing….? Then that would just be pathetic.
“You can’t…?” Zoro’s voice suddenly cut in, oddly choosing that moment, but Sanji just shook his head.

“No. Why else do you think I brought you on the sidequest,” he muttered miserably. “The mechanics wouldn’t let me do it alone. I dunno if it’s supposed to be some dumb symbolism or what, but it’s shitty.”

“Well, your prediction does seem logical,” Sharley interrupted, to which Sanji couldn’t help but roll his eyes.

Even if he wasn’t the only one in on this anymore, the ultimate decision—the burden—was all on him.

Zoro was watching him again, he could feel it, only this time, he didn’t ignore him. Instead, Sanji actively looked at him to see his reaction, and when he did, he was surprised to see a look of—what was that? Surely not concern. Right…?

“It seems to me you’ll need to decide what matters most to you,” Sharley added, in lieu of a response from Sanji.

Oddly, when she said this, Zoro seemed to panic a little, quickly averting his eyes and turning his head from Sanji almost sheepishly.

It was strange, and Sanji thought he could have imagined it, especially when a passive expression erased whatever emotion that may have flashed in Zoro’s eyes.

Sanji knew what mattered most to him, in the end, and that was his friends’ well-being, his friends’ futures. Maybe he wouldn’t have been so selfless when he first came to the house, eager to look out for himself and only himself, still harboring the damage, both physical and emotional, from the abuse of his father and his brothers.

But now he knew he’d do anything to help his friends.

He just wished helping them wouldn’t push them away from him when he very much needed them.

And he had to figure out…was Zoro included in that necessary category…?

“You said I’m psychic. In the game,” Sharley was saying, forcing Sanji to blink a few times and bring his attention back to her.

She sat looking at him, her teacup raised to her lips with unabashed curiosity in her eyes.

“Did I say anything of use?” she asked, reminding Sanji that he hadn’t actually played out that part of the game yet.

“Oh…I dunno,” he answered truthfully. “Not yet at least. I mean, we just came across you.”

Zoro’s gaze flicked subtly to the blond again, hearing him use ‘we’ instead of simply ‘I’...

“I can—I mean, I can tell you if you want,” the blond said, bending over to rummage in his backpack for his 3DS, and Zoro couldn’t help but notice the apprehension that still pulled at Sanji’s brow, the way he almost didn’t seem to want to play the next part of the game.

Zoro found himself standing, crossing the room to sit beside Sanji so he could watch, and, surprisingly, the blond said nothing about it, just darted eyes his way briefly.
The mosshead watched him expectantly until he finally flipped open the device.

As much as Sanjius is a prince of the people, he has never imagined himself in his current situation, seated in a witch’s hut on the lake, amongst the smell of incense and the rich hanging tapestries and cushions that remind him of an Alabastian abode rather than one of his kingdom. And he very much has never pictured himself in this situation with Zorin of all people.

The lake is huge. The far shore is fuzzy in the distance, and the way the water curves and disappears around the bend of the mountains makes Sanjius feel embarrassed he didn’t even know a breathtaking place like this existed in his kingdom.

It’s a fascinating little hut, jutting out over the lake on a wooden platform, and there’s a hatch and a set of stairs leading down to the water below where the prince saw a small boat when they approached not long ago.

Zorin has plopped himself down on the floor, crushing a few intricate pillows with his body weight without a care.

Sanjius, meanwhile, takes far greater consideration when choosing a seat, shooting Zorin a glare for his rudeness. The prince lowers himself to a deep purple cushion that is clearly made for sitting, brushing his cape out from under him, something that only earns an eyeroll from Zorin in turn.

But Sanjius ignores it, instead taking the tea Sharlille has offered him with a grateful smile, despite the bout of nerves still twisting at his gut.

The woman holds up the small decorative teapot in offer to Zorin, who merely shakes his head in reply. She returns it to the small stove in the center of the room, then kneels down on another cushion near Sanjius.

With the fine netting draped on the wall behind her and the way she turns both her legs gracefully to the side beneath her long dress, she looks like a mermaid, Sanjius thinks.

“So, Your Highness,” she says casually, as if they haven’t just battled a small army of wraiths on the way to meet her. “What is it you want to know from me?”

The prince lets out a breath, lowering his tea and wondering what doesn’t he want to know now that he knows she exists.

He’s torn though, between wanting to trust in the efficacy of his own kingdom….and wondering if he should believe the predictions of someone else. Even if they came true before, surely not everything is set in stone.

“That depends on what you can tell me,” he says slowly, diplomatically, unsure of the extent of her powers. “As you may or may not know, we have reason to believe my father has invaded the capital. We are journeying to Whole Cakia to seek reinforcements. I don’t want to believe the fight is futile, but I suppose I’m curious about whether there is a better way…”

Her dark eyebrows pull downwards subtly, and she frowns. “I am aware of the invasion, yes,” Sharlille replies quietly.

Then, she moves, setting her tea down on a low shelf of a bookcase against the wall and gestures Sanjius over to a small table nearby, pushing aside a few hanging cloths as she does. On the table is a clear glass ball nestled within an intricately carved stand, that of an ornate dragon claw seemingly
protruding up from the table to hold the orb.

Sanjius follows her, though he can’t help but notice the rather skeptical look on Zorin’s face. The prince gives the oaf’s shin a kick for good measure when he passes him, earning himself a dirty glare, before settling down at the table opposite the witch.

“Be warned,” Sharlille says, smoothing out her skirt and giving a little flex of fingers before she reaches out to hover them over the ball. “What I see may not be positive.”

A comforting thought, and Sanjius has to resist letting out a scoff. As if things haven’t already taken a turn for the negative already. But he keeps his cynicism to himself and his gaze focused on her slender fingertips.

“I’m prepared,” he assures instead, and only then does she touch her fingers down onto the glass.

As soon as she does, a purple glow takes hold of the ball, not unlike the icy blue that surrounds Robisia’s hands when she heals, or the brilliant orange and white of Namilia’s staff.

He watches as the witch’s eyes close, and a swirling cloud-like substance begins to billow within the orb, flashes of light illuminating it like a tiny lightning storm beneath the glass. In fact, the whole room seems to succumb to the same charged energy, the very environment darkening, as if the sun has been blocked out.

Despite his vow to remain calm, Sanjius can’t help but feel his pulse pick up anxiously, and his gaze automatically shifts to Zorin, almost unconsciously looking for reassurance.

The knight seems not to have noticed though, or at least, he looks just as composed as before, but he’s got a sharp eye on Sharlille, the only sign that he might be feeling wary himself.

The prince decides to take a note from the moss-headed brute, steeling his own gaze and quelling his nerves. He said he was prepared and he is. Come what may.

But that’s easier said than done, especially when Sharlille’s hands begin to tremble, the swirling within the globe changing to a darker color as it grows angrier, and the expression on her face tenses unpleasantly.

Her breathing grows harsher, forceful breaths in and out of her nose, and Sanjius actually starts to fear that the ball will burst and unleash whatever darkness is trapped inside, something he knows he doesn’t want.

There’s the clinking of glass. He realizes that a breeze has somehow picked up, sending hanging glass bottles colliding like pendulums. The slosh of water from below the floor hatch grows louder just as the sound of a crow squawks loudly outside.

Something is happening, and even Zorin shows his awareness of it, the knight having straightened, his eyes flicking around the room with a more hawkish alertness.

Sanjius tries to meet his eye, wondering if he should stop this somehow.

But just as soon as their eyes meet, the frantic pace of the activity seems to pull into itself like a vacuum until the room is at a standstill, completely silent.

The two have no choice but to turn back to Sharlille, whose eyes are still closed, her frame wilting as she pulls still-trembling hands from the globe to her lap.
Sanjius waits a few seconds, watches her carefully, before breaking that oddly delicate silence to ask, “Are you alright…?”

Her shoulders still hunched, almost with a huge burden, hands clasping tightly to stop them shaking, she doesn’t reply, but slowly opens her eyes and lifts her gaze to Sanjius.

But instead of the hint of amusement that had been there earlier, sparkling behind the blue, there’s an extreme gravity now, as if she knows far too much.

“What did you see…?” Sanjius asks again, growing afraid for her answer.

She looks at him guiltily, takes a long moment to respond.

But she does, and her words send a chill right down the prince’s spine.

“Baratia will not fall,” she says. “It will thrive once more under the Vinsmoke name… But your days as our prince, Your Highness… I’m afraid they are numbered.”

The silence that follows is poignant, and in fact, it’s not Sanjius who reacts first.

No, it’s Zorin whose outburst follows, almost immediately after her words are out.

“What the hell do you mean?!”, he growls, with more menace than Sanjius could have ever expected.

When, through his own shock, he dares a glance at the swordsman, he sees his knight’s ferocity, teeth bared like a furious tiger.

“I only see destruction,” Sharlille barely elaborates. “The future is malleable; I cannot tell you specifics---”

“So why did you say his days are numbered?!” Zorin hisses again, and if Sanjius didn’t know better, he’d say his voice was laced with fear. “That explains nothing!”

“I see great danger for your troop!” is all she replies with, her voice growing more forceful. “I warned you to be prepared for better or worse! If you want to stay alive, you must---!”

“Of course he’s staying alive!” Zorin roars, slamming his fist into the wood of the floor with a great crack, splitting the wood.

Heavy breaths leave him, the room stunned into silence once more, following his cry.

Sanjius stares at him, his shock now directed towards why---why Zorin would react so strongly.

Zorin is still seething, though he slowly seems to become aware of what he’s just done, his fist lifting from the dent he’s made, fingers flexing uncomfortably.

But it’s only another second before he gets to his feet, storming across the room and throwing aside some hanging cloth near the door in order to make his escape.

Sanjius follows him with a gaze that is now fearful as well, seeing his knight overcome by emotion like that, something that didn’t even happen after Brokard’s death.

They haven’t received much of an explanation, and Sanjius can quickly feel his curiosity slipping away, replaced with dread and a sense that he doesn’t want to know more about the future.
His only hope is that this future she speaks of truly is malleable.

“My apologies,” he mutters hastily, and finds himself standing as well, abandoning his tea and the foreboding atmosphere that peaceful little hut has quickly taken on in favor of hurrying after Zorin.

He strides outside and onto the rocky path leading from the hut, across a small grassy clearing on the banks of the lake, which morphs into the forest not far away.

Zorin is already at the edge of the trees, gathering up Wado and adjusting his stirrups before swinging atop the horse quickly.

“Zorin!” Sanjius calls out, Siren trotting over to him with some apprehension at the shrill tone of his voice.

The knight doesn’t answer, just turns Wado towards the forest and faces stubbornly away.

“Zorin!” the prince calls again, more urgently, climbing onto Siren as well and urging her to cross the clearing, steering her around until she partially blocks Wado’s path.

It’s here that he finally growls out, “What in hell’s name was that?!”, hoping to bait the knight into answering.

It works.

“We’re not believing anything a damned witch has to tell us!” Zorin roars. “Nothing is predestined, and it would be damned stupid to believe that it---!”

“Do you think I’ve resigned myself to failure?!” Sanjius shoots back, realizing he’s about to spill feelings he’s kept bottled up for some time now, things he’s begun to assume about his controlling knight. “I can’t, or else it really will bring about destruction! I have no choice but to stay positive! What I don’t understand is why you seem to think I’m too weak to do so!”

This seems to take Zorin aback, his eyes betraying his surprise briefly before they soon narrow again.

“When did I ever say you were weak?” he bites out with disbelief.

“You’re treating me like it!” Sanjius insists. “Ever since---since Brokard---” He can’t finish that thought, so he tries again with another. “I can fight! You know I can! So why are you---?”

“I’m trying to protect you!” Zorin snaps, but Sanjius comes right back with a retort.

“I need you to fight with me, not for me!”

These words and the prince’s furious tone seem to give Zorin pause, the anger in Zorin’s expression simmering and turning more quietly troubled. It’s odd to see, given his passionate adamance of just moments earlier.

It’s another moment before Sanjius realizes Zorin’s going to pull Wado around and drop the argument; he recognizes the way Zorin averts his eyes evasively.

So Sanjius is quick to nudge heels into Siren’s sides to make her step forward, again blocking Zorin’s escape. He’s not finished yet.

“Why do you care so damned much?” he asks, another question that’s been eating at him. “You’ve
only been my knight for a year, and while I can’t deny your loyalty, we have never gotten along! Duty aside, why are you even here?”

It comes out more harshly than he planned, but he doesn’t regret voicing it. However, the reaction he gets is entirely unexpected.

His assumption had been for Zorin to come forth with another cagey reply or another attempt at diversion.

But, instead, Zorin’s face actually falls, hurt overcoming his features in a way Sanjius has never seen before. It’s enough to take his breath away, leave him feeling inexplicably upset for reasons other than what he’s been arguing.

“You really….don’t know?” Zorin says, voice much quieter than it was before. “You don’t….remember…?”

“Remember what?” Sanjius huffs out, a little exasperated and eager to cover up all the fear and concern that still brews within him.

But before there’s a chance for Zorin to reply, a loud crack of thunder splits the air, startling both the horses and causing both men to jolt as well. Because the sky is blue, hardly a cloud in sight….except for the dark turbulent mass that’s begun to form in the distance, just barely visible atop the trees. It has to be over the village.

The prince’s eyes widen in alarm.

“That’s Namilia’s magic,” he breathes, seeing it rumble and flash with lightning. “Come on!”

Then, he hurriedly yanks Siren around and sets her off cantering down the path, as fast as he dares through the thick undergrowth.

Zorin has no choice but to follow.

Sanji quickly closed his 3DS, almost in a panic, seeing that small animation of clear trouble pop up over the village on the game’s world map. A battle, surely, and one he wasn’t yet ready for.

That whole damn cutscene had made him uncomfortable, not just for how oddly prophetic it had been, but for the reaction of Zoro’s character. He didn’t want to think that the real Zoro felt anything similar.

The look on Zoro’s face, however, couldn’t help but darken some because he knew what needed to happen now, what he wanted to happen and what should happen, given the circumstances.

Sanji was trying to cover up his own discomfort---he could tell---turning to his lukewarm tea and exchanging terse words with Sharley, some bullshit about how he supposed he’d need to figure things out on his own.

Zoro didn’t buy it. Why the fuck was he trying to take this burden for himself? Yes, he was the one playing, but Sharley had even said. The game had appeared to him, not Sanji, so that was all the more reason to go into this together.

Before long, the blond had downed all of his tea and stood, gathering his things in a clear cue for them to leave, something that Zoro had no choice but to go along with.
At least the woman had believed them, given them some insight into how the hell the game had come about, even as farfetched as the story was. Zoro had never thought of himself as having particularly good suspension of disbelief, but he was sure having to rely on it now.

And he hadn’t pegged Sanji as a person who could either.

But this was happening. There was no denying that, and by the time they made it out of the shop, with Sanji hastily clipping on his helmet and throwing a leg over his bike already, Zoro was ready to make that clear.

“You know what you have to do, right?” he pressed, hoping he could get it through the blond’s stubborn head.

“Yes, Zoro!” Sanji grumbled, already kicking off and rolling his bike from the sidewalk towards the first grid of parked cars. “If I hear you telling me I should kill off Nami one more ti---”

“You’ve gotta kill yourself!” Sanji’s tires skidded to a halt, and he very nearly steered himself right into the bumper of a rather pristine black Audi parked next to him.

“What?” his voice screeched in a fine imitation of his tires.

“You heard me!” Zoro insists. “What if you get stuck in the game otherwise! What if nothing happens for you---!”

“And if I do that, what’ll happen to everyone else, genius?” Sanji shoots back. “Nothing! And I refuse to let anyone else be---”

“Then help the others first and leave me! You even said yourself you didn’t want to help me! So you’ve got nothing to lose!”

Maybe it fucking hurt to think that, but it didn’t hurt as much as the thought of Sanji being left behind, of Sanji not finding happiness, knowing how badly he wanted it.

Sanji’s brows drew in almost angrily, and Zoro didn’t know why because here he was, giving Sanji an out, so why the hell wouldn’t he just take it?

Knowing how Sanji felt about him, he wasn’t about to entertain the possibility of Sanji changing his mind in regards to helping him. He couldn’t entertain that, no matter how good it would feel.

As far as Zoro was concerned, it was one of them or the other. And, as it stood, it would be better if Sanji was the one receiving the good fortune.

“Do you think I can’t deal with this, Zoro?” Sanji was hissing, digging fingernails into the handlebars of his bike. “Because I can! You don’t need to step in and act like some martyr who---”

“I’m not being a martyr! I just don’t want you to get left in this situation alone, with---!”

“Why?” Sanji growled defensively. “Since when have you ever given a shit about me?!?”

“Because I fucking know what it feels like to be alone and isolating yourself---pushing people away!” Zoro blurted out, and it wasn’t something he’d planned, unfortunately, but there was no taking it back now.

He stood there for a second, squinting at Sanji in the sunlight, breathing heavily, with the blond’s expression adopting a bit of bewilderment in response.
Zoro made a frustrated noise, wishing Sanji would just get it without him having to spell it out. It was awkward as hell.

But that aside, maybe he would have explained himself. Maybe he would have opened up, had the sound of Sanji’s phone buzzing not interrupted them, effectively destroying the moment.

The blond stood there for a beat, still looking a little stunned from the abrupt turn of the confrontation before he shook his head and pulled the device from his pocket.

Zoro saw his eyes flick across the screen, saw his shoulders slump, and heard his small whine of “What…?”

He didn’t have to pry an explanation from him though because Sanji was already typing a quick reply, then resituating himself on his bike, sticking his phone back in his pocket.

“That was Nami,” he muttered over his shoulder. “Apparently Brook’s heading out. We should get back.”

Then he pushed off the ground and started riding across the parking lot again.

Zoro watched him for a second, trying hard to push down any disdain for Nami that rose within him following her interruption. Would they get another shot at that conversation…? He had no way of knowing.

All he could do was follow, drop his skateboard to the asphalt and kick off, a hand to the back of that black Audi to give him some momentum.

A few seconds after the two rolled off, however, the door to that car opened, a tall, dark-haired man in a floral-printed shirt getting out of the driver’s side and observing the retreating teens for a moment.

He remembered that boy—the same boy who’d passed by his house the previous day—the one with the green hair. He knew for a fact he resided in that home for adolescents up on the hill.

And did he hear correctly? Because they seemed to be speaking of a rather peculiar game...

Mihawk shut the car door and strode towards the Mermaid Café, eager for that cup of coffee he’d driven out here for.

It would help him think...

None of them wanted to be standing out here on the front porch, watching as Brook packed his things into his boxy Volkswagen van that surprisingly still ran just fine despite being almost as ancient as its owner.

None of them wanted to see a dear friend leave after spending two happy years together.

But all of them wanted to see Brook doing what he loved, with someone whom he’d connected with long before any of them were even born.

And that was why they all stood there, smiling as best they could, Robin and Franky reminding him of the usual formalities, despite Brook being a grown man, nearly older than all six of the kids combined. How long was the drive to Mt. Reverse going to be? Could he call when he met up with Laboon and his band? Remember the instructions for keeping them updated on Instagram.
There were hugs, and despite their most valiant of preventative efforts, there were tears, Chopper, Usopp, and Luffy clinging to Brook the longest before the old man finally extracted himself with promises to be in contact again soon.

Still, as they watched Brook pull away, Franky had gathered up the younger boys in one big hulking embrace. Robin put a comforting hand on Nami’s shoulder, and Zoro and Sanji stood beside each other, watching the van roll down the hill as solemnly as they’d watch a burning building.

Brook gave one last beep of his car horn before driving off down the road, leaving Sunny’s remaining inhabitants standing there on the white porch with an empty street at the bottom of the front lawn.

As soon as Brook was out of sight, Franky gave Chopper, Luffy, and Usopp a squeeze, then asked, “What do you think? Cola floats all-around? We can make a toast and wish our old bro good luck!”

“Yeahhh!” the three boys cried, literally through their tears, but still clearly eager for excess sugar on a school night.

They headed inside, and after they did, Nami slowly removed herself from under Robin’s hand and turned back into the house too, ascending the stairs to her room.

Robin noticed that neither Zoro nor Sanji had moved just yet, and didn’t look ready to, so she sighed and moved past them, hands squeezing both of their shoulders as she did. The woman lingered in the doorway for just a moment, watching them almost curiously before she too entered the house, though she left the front door partially ajar for them.

They didn’t say anything, but Zoro was hyper-aware of Sanji’s presence, and he wondered if the blond felt the same.

His stance was a little tense, Zoro noticed when he snuck a glance, the blond’s hands in his pockets, his backpack still slung over one shoulder, and for some reason, the image of a cigarette on Sanji’s lips flashed through Zoro’s mind. It wasn’t like Sanji smoked. It just seemed to fit. But it was probably just because of the way he was standing.

Zoro didn’t know if he should say anything, though he somewhat felt the need to after their little argument in the parking lot of the shopping center.

That argument had felt different, after all, from the dumb name-calling and taunting rituals they went through normally. It had felt personal, about things that only the two of them knew about and while that was weird, it was also the reason why Zoro stayed standing there, wondering if things were going to go right back to how they usually were or if Sanji was really going to accept his help.

They both stood on the porch in silence for what felt like several minutes, and very well might have been. But it wasn’t so much awkward because they were both stuck in their thoughts, and maybe the warm afternoon breeze was helping to clear them, with nothing but the faint sound of the ocean and the delicate tones of Robin’s windchimes.

Finally, Sanji turned, pivoting smoothly towards the door.

“She’s next,” was all he murmured, taking hold of the door handle and swinging it open some more, the lion-shaped knocker rattling a little as he did.

Zoro couldn’t help the way his eyes widened and his jaw dropped in disbelief, particularly when Sanji lingered in the doorway and actually met his eye with an expectant look, almost as if he were waiting for Zoro to come with him.
Zoro stared at him, unable to stop the bit of wariness that came to his gaze, even as he took a tentative step towards the door and followed Sanji inside.

The blond turned and led the way upstairs, still not protesting the fact that Zoro followed, until, eventually, they were both in their room, with Zoro seated beside Sanji on his bed again, somewhat miraculously.

Sanji had dropped his backpack on the floor and pulled out his 3DS.

With a heavy sigh, he muttered, “Let’s get this over with…”

And Zoro found himself thinking the exact opposite.

If Sanji was going to include him in this, then he definitely wanted it to last as long as it could.

---

The village is in chaos when the hooves of their horses thunder back into the square, though it’s not immediately apparent why.

People are scrambling about, abandoning the remnants of the feast they’d enjoyed but a few hours earlier in favor of rushing into their houses with panicked cries, adults quickly ushering children in before them.

A few brave men and women reemerge shortly after, armed with primitive weapons---knives, pitchforks, and the like.

Namilia’s storm cloud still hovers over the village menacingly, rumbling and flashing with lightning within, though both Sanjius and Zorin realize it was nothing more than a signal when they find their friends all intact, forming a defensive circle in the middle of the square.

But, at first, there’s no sign of a threat. And yet, Luffient stands strong in a tense battle stance, his fists clenched as he whirs about, a furious gaze seeming to search the very air around him.

“Come back out, you weird floaty skeletons!” he yells, nearly steaming with his rage, and Sanjius quickly dismounts, running the short distance to meet his friends, Siren staying obediently behind.

“What’s happening?” the prince calls, but he’s barely gotten the words out before a high-pitched screech splits the air, similar to the eerie sounds they heard in the forest, and he knows what’s coming a second before it occurs.

In the air, materializing several meters off the ground, is yet another wraith, just like the ones lurking in the trees, and it’s quickly joined by others, each with horrible gaping maws that seem to mock them with their perpetual sneers.

They merely hover for a moment, but only the foolish would assume they pose no threat. Because their immobility lasts but a second before the first lunges, followed soon after by its brethren, and the fight is forced to begin.

Sanjius sees Luffient and Zorin jump into the fray, with fists and swords flying, Francus not far behind as he immediately fires one of his curious handheld cannons that are, to this day, unlike any other weapon the prince has seen.

Robisia crosses hands gracefully over her chest and sends a blast of purple energy to drive a few of the wraiths back, creating a temporary force field around their group. This gives Usio, Namilia, and Chonrad time to ready their respective weapons before they too join the skirmish.
A loud screech behind him, and Sanjius turns and pivots just in time to connect his boot with a deadly scythe swung at him with alarming speed. But he stops it easily, the sturdy leather of his boot and the reinforced steel soles more than enough to support his kick. He may not wear armor, but he mentally thanks Francus for working his blacksmith magic on them.

The wraith pushes off him with surprising strength given its billowing mist-like form, sending Sanjius skidding back in the dirt, nearly colliding with Zorin as the knight takes on another.

There’s no snarl from his swordsman, however, no hiss for Sanjius to get out of his way. No, instead, Zorin’s shoulders meet his lightly, and he finds them working together rather effortlessly, protecting each other’s backs, affording them both better range and efficiency when attacking.

Zorin moves with grace and agility, his swords dissipating two wraiths at once, their echoing wails lingering in the air after they dematerialize, a powerful series of kicks from the prince dropping another pair as well.

In any other setting, maybe it would have been a competition between the two of them, but right then, all Sanjius can think about is protecting his friends, making sure Sharlille’s ominous prophecy doesn’t come true. Making sure he doesn’t lose anyone else.

He still has a view of everyone, after all, taking the brief lull afforded to him by the death of his attackers to scan the square, notice that the others are holding their own.

Robisia and Francus have paired off, easily teaming up, Robisia protecting the burly knight with her magic while he reloads his cannon and unleashes fire upon an advancing swarm of undead.

Usio and Chonrad are making quick work of their own battle as well, Usio with his powerful slingshot and Chonrad having mounted his horse to attack fearlessly with his lance.

And then there’s Luffient, at the center of it all, foregoing his sword, as usual, to somehow send a wraith bursting into thin air with his fist alone, knuckles cracking against the flat of the creature’s scythe before shattering it entirely.

His friends’ strength is unmatched, and seeing them in action is more than enough to remind Sanjius of this. What does he need to fear when they are all here, fiercely working together without hesitance to take on any foe?

All of them are---

But that’s when he realizes, with sickening clarity, that Namilia is missing. She’s not in the square with the others, and though her storm cloud hovers above, she is nowhere in sight.

The prince’s eyes widen fearfully at the realization, but he can’t move from position as yet another wave of wraiths comes his way, giving him no choice but to fight back.

And yet, between kicks, he is searching, with growing panic, eyes looking frantically between houses for a glimpse of her white cloak, or the glint of her golden armor. He’d give anything to see just a flicker of her orange hair to show she’s still fighting, but there’s nothing for the longest time.

The wraiths are dwindling, and when he feels Zorin’s back touch his again after felling what looks to be the last of them, Sanjius does feel a sense of relief, despite the pounding of his heart and the heavy breaths leaving him.

An odd surge of strength seems to flow into him, almost because of the contact with Zorin, but that could very well be his imagination. He can’t exactly deny, though, the burst of confidence he feels
when their eyes meet, Zorin looking just as relieved through his breathlessness, his gaze flicking up and down the prince’s form before intense eyes settle on the blond’s calming blue.

But that’s when it all goes wrong.

Suddenly, there’s a pained cry in the distance, somewhere outside the square, and, with alarming speed, Namilia’s storm cloud gives a low rumble, a final weak flash of light. And then it sucks in on itself, shrinking….shrinking….until it disappears into nothing, revealing, once more, the clear sky.

Sunlight hits the village again, and though the villagers who’d stayed to fight look overjoyed, dropping weapons in favor of embracing and clapping each other on the back, the prince knows better.

In fact, all of his friends do, as, even from their scattered positions, the returned warmth of the sun only illuminates their shared looks of absolute dread, caused by the stabbing pain in their hearts….because they’ve all been here and none of them were there---with her.

Sanjius isn’t sure how they find her. Like with Brokard, he only remembers complete and utter panic overtaking his senses, and when he finds himself standing in a muddy alley between a run-down tavern and a candlemaker’s, he absolutely cannot calm his breathing, nor the horrified tightening of his chest as he stares at the sight before him.

Luffient is the first to fall to his knees beside her, shaking his head in denial and staring down at her for a few moments of shock before he pulls Namilia’s limp form into his arms, a trembling hand meeting her pale cheek.

“Hey---Na---Nam---w-wake up,” he is stuttering, hardly able to make words come out fully.

The arm holding her gives a shake, but when it only serves to make her sink more heavily into his arms, her head lolling back unnaturally, it seems to send all of them recoiling in shock.

Robisia quickly kneels opposite Luffient, her hand glowing blue over the strange wound they only now notice on her stomach, the armor around it melted and oozing with a creeping dark substance that is blacker than black.

The glow of her hand brightens, but then dims, her hand shying away seemingly beyond her control, but she tries again, with greater force, only to have the same thing happen again, and the rest of them know what this means. They know what it means, but they are hardly willing to accept it.

Tremors run through Robisia’s hand as she tries a third time, except now she can’t even call upon her healing powers for more than a moment. It’s clear from the determined exhale that leaves her that she doesn’t want to give up, but still, she clasps her traitorous hand with the other, only able to stare with slowly creeping horror at the futility before her.

Luffient shakes his head again, staring at Robisia with wide, pleading eyes before flicking them down to Namilia once more, pulling her closer against his chest.

“No,” he breathes, then again, more forcefully. “No!”

A tearless sob escapes him, mind still stuck in denial, but his body surely beyond control.

Why shouldn’t he be in denial? Why should any of them believe this has happened? They are still shattered, still unaccepting of Brokard’s death. They can’t have lost another, and surely not Namilia, who is one of the best at self-preservation amongst them. Not two hours earlier, she’d passed that warning to Zorin and the prince, and yet, her staff rests forgotten in the mud, just as she lies,
beautiful and delicate---empty---in Luffient’s arms.

No more.

Why is this happening?

Is there really such a thing as fate? A greater power at play that is ripping all control away?

Robisia and Francus stare numbly. Chonrad and Usio’s shocked tears have begun to fall, and the tortured, agonized scream that escapes Luffient seems to rattle the whole world, pierces their souls anew.

Zorin stands beside the prince, a vulnerable shudder in his breathing, and Sanjius doesn’t understand.

He doesn’t understand.

For Sanji, it was significantly more difficult to watch this time, as the screen faded to black and took him, once more, back to the map, albeit with one less member of his party.

He’d done it though. He’d moved Nami to an isolated corner and let the wraiths pick her off, slowly burning down her HP until she was gone. Maybe it was just a game, but he still felt dirty and dishonorable for not coming to her defense.

He still felt shame and guilt over it because, this time, he’d actively decided on letting her die, and this time, he knew that the odd shift in the air that occurred as soon as he lowered his 3DS was very real. He hadn’t imagined it like he thought he had with Brook.

Zoro seemed to notice it too, having watched the whole thing beside him, and when the doorbell suddenly rang downstairs, the two of them practically jumped out of their skin, eyes wide as their gazes automatically met.

Did they dare leave the room? Did they dare investigate?

Sanji was almost scared to, and hell if he knew why. But his heart was fluttering lightly in his chest, eyes flicking from Zoro’s to stare fearfully at their closed bedroom door.

It was a long minute of being both annoyed by Zoro’s presence, but also glad for it, knowing that, had he been alone, he might have doubted himself, might not have had the courage to stop Nami’s character from attacking, to back her into that alleyway as he had.

And he might not have had the courage to stand either, finally making his way slowly towards the door, Zoro getting to his feet immediately after and padding across the carpet as well.

It was kind of nice that he didn’t say anything, and yes, Sanji supposed that he could grudgingly appreciate that now. Zoro hadn’t said anything to him following their argument in the parking lot, and the blond was relieved considering how damn uncomfortable things had gotten.

Because for a moment there, Zoro had voiced something about understanding him---saying he knew how it felt to want to push people away, and dammit, Sanji hadn’t liked the tone in his voice, the pain there that Sanji didn’t know how to react to.

He didn’t like to think that Zoro was telling the truth, that maybe they had more in common than he’d ever assumed or cared to notice….
It was awkward, and so he was glad Zoro had kept quiet afterwards.

And maybe, just maybe, he could admit to himself that he was also a little grateful for his support---the fact that Zoro had kept supporting him after that. That he hadn’t retreated within himself and left Sanji to deal with this all alone…

Sanji felt weird for thinking that, considering how much he hadn’t wanted anything to do with the guy practically a day ago.

He shook his head, ridding himself of complicated thoughts and throwing open the door, striding down the hallway, past Nami’s closed door and Brook’s now-empty room to the top of the stairs.

At the bottom, Robin was at the front door, inviting in a pair of guests that were certainly unexpected, but weren’t unsurprising, especially to Zoro and Sanji.

Robin had a warm smile on her face, ushering in none other than Nami’s friend, Vivi, and a tall man with long curly hair and a rather stylishly trimmed goatee. He wore a loose purple jacket, and though his hair was a dark black in contrast to Vivi’s pastel blue, it was the way he touched the girl’s shoulder as he entered the house behind her that clued Sanji in.

He must have been Vivi’s father, and his smile all but confirmed it. He had the same kind brown eyes as his daughter.

It felt strange to have visitors here, especially another kid from school, even if she and Nami were friends. And despite everything, the fact that he tried not to be shameful of his living situation, Sanji couldn’t help but feel a twinge of embarrassment, particularly when Vivi looked up to see him and Zoro stood up on the landing.

They hadn’t interacted much at school, admittedly, with her being in Luffy and Usopp’s grade, but she still smiled and gave a cheerful wave up at the two, causing Sanji’s face to heat.

The blond managed a tiny smile in return, just to be polite, but in reality, he was debating turning away and heading back to their room.

Robin’s voice stopped him though, the woman looking up the stairs as well before she asked, “Would one of you mind fetching Nami, please? She has some visitors.”

Of course, Zoro and Sanji both figured they knew just why Vivi and her dad had shown up, given what they’d done in the game, but hearing Robin voice it aloud seemed to solidify it.

Still, Sanji was never one to turn down a request from Miss Robin, so he was the first to react, turning on his heel and heading to Nami’s room, starting to feel ready to accept the fact that a second friend might very well be getting a way out of here because of him.

He should be happy, and he was, but that happiness still sent a pang of selfish pain, and maybe a little jealousy, through him, and that was why Sanji remained as solemn as he was.

Standing outside Nami’s door, he gave a soft knock, called her name gently, and when she didn’t reply, he tentatively turned the doorknob and opened the door, poking his head in.

The girl was sitting on her bed, propped up against a bunch of pillows with a book in her lap, though she didn’t seem to be focusing on it much as she absently turned a page.

She did glance up to look at him though, and he offered a tilt of lips, in spite of how he felt.
“Nami, Vivi’s here to see you,” he said.

Instantly, surprise colored her features and she sat up straighter, flipping the book shut.

“Vivi?” she repeated, and when he nodded, she let out a breath, her brow furrowing slightly as if trying to work through this fact.

But she quickly scrambled off the bed, leaving her book there on the mattress, and strode across the room with more liveliness than Sanji had seen in a few days. It wasn’t like Nami to mope, but seeing this immediate change in the girl as she passed Sanji and hurried down the hall was enough to seal the deal for the blond.

As painful as it was for him, he’d made the right decision. And he shouldn’t care about what would happen to him.

So long as his friends were happy.

And yes, maybe he would include Zoro in that thought.
Sanji almost didn’t want to listen in to the conversation currently happening in the living room between Robin, Nami, and their guests. He was pretty sure he knew the outcome already, but the thought of that outcome, as good as it would probably be, made him sad.

Still, he felt responsible for whatever was about to happen, so he bravely prepared some drinks and a snack tray for their guests, Zoro practically shadowing him the whole time as if he wanted to say something. He made sure to shoot looks at the idiot though, indicating that now was not the time to discuss anything. Not when Robin sat chatting amiably with Vivi’s dad, Nami seeming far more like herself, almost relieved, Sanji thought when he stole glances into the other room. It was nice to see a bit of spark back in her eyes.

He didn’t know what they were talking about, though he desperately wanted to, and he found himself hurrying to prepare everything just so he could enter the room and possibly listen in.

The whole thing was pretty mysterious, after all, the game events aside. How had Vivi known where they lived, for instance? Unless Nami had told her, which would have been surprising as hell. Even if Vivi and Nami were close, Nami never liked to speak about their living situation.

But even in his haste, Sanji wasn’t going to send out anything that didn’t look fabulous, so cheese and meat squares were still artfully laid on a platter, drinks poured thoughtfully into glasses, complete with lemon and tangerine slices on the rims of Vivi’s dad’s and the girls’, respectively.

Eventually, he hoisted the large snack dish up skillfully on the palm of a hand, grabbed Nami and Vivi’s drinks in the other, but that still left Robin’s and Mr. Nefertari’s. He couldn’t carry them all, so he’d decided on making two trips, only to have Zoro reach out and take the remaining glasses, raising an eyebrow and jerking his head towards the living room silently.

Sanji froze, staring at the mosshead for a moment before rolling his eyes and stalking past him with a muttered, “Don’t you dare drop them.”

It was so fucking weird, how helpful and kind of useful the idiot was proving himself to be now, and Sanji honestly wasn’t sure if it was because of what had happened in the game, or if it was Zoro’s own free will.

He wasn’t sure which he preferred. If it was because of Zoro’s free will, then that was good….but why would he decide now was the time to suddenly change their relationship…?

What he couldn’t have known was just how much his attention was impacting Zoro, who’d been wanting the blond to just fucking see him for once for so many years. And the fact that Sanji was grudgingly accepting his help and support?

It was surprising and delicate, and thus, Zoro didn’t want to fuck anything up. It hadn’t been long at all since any of this had started, and Zoro knew that one wrong move could easily have things going right back to how they always were.

Zoro didn’t want that. He didn’t think he’d be able to handle it now that he’d gotten a small taste of something better...

He followed Sanji into the room, watched the blond put on a whole waiter show, telling everyone
what kinds of cheeses were on the plate, which would appeal to a stronger versus more mild palate—basically shit no one truly cared about. At least not Zoro. He’d eat whatever was set out in front of him. Screw being picky.

Sanji had set down the girls’ drinks, some of Nami’s tangerine juice, on the coffee table in the middle of the sitting area before jerking his head in a signal for Zoro to give the adults their drinks.

He did so with much less ceremony, just kind of passing Robin’s coffee and Vivi’s dad’s iced tea to them with vague grunts.

Robin had thanked him with a smile, giving the teen a curious look at his odd behavior, but she said nothing about him suddenly becoming a little servant to Sanji, merely sipped at her steaming drink and turned back to their guests.

Zoro reached out to grab Sanji’s sleeve, physically pulling the blond to the edge of the room at least, if only so he wouldn’t hover awkwardly in a conversation that no one else knew had anything to do with him.

Sanji stumbled back and glared at him, but didn’t protest out loud.

“Now that we’re more settled,” Robin said, bringing her coffee to her lap and ignoring the small disturbance from the two boys with a subtle smirk on her lips. “I’d love to hear more about your work, Mr. Nefertari~ Nami tells us you and your daughter have lived in several different countries. As someone with a degree in archaeology and cultural studies, color me intrigued.”

The man had shed his purple jacket, and now sat in a short-sleeved button-down with a tropical print not unlike something Franky would own, sandals planted firmly on the floor as he sat rather regally despite his casual attire. He gave a stroke to his impressive goatee, eyes crinkling in a warm smile as he met Robin’s eye easily.

“Please. Call me Cobra,” he responded, holding up a hand with a chuckle. “We do get around~ And it’s afforded us many incredible experiences. We love seeing the world.”

His eyes flicked to his daughter though, who sat beside Nami with a faint, polite smile on her face that didn’t quite reach her eyes, especially when she glanced over to look at Nami, who reached out to squeeze her forearm in comfort.

“I’ll admit it’s not without its challenges, of course, the constant moving,” Cobra continued, his voice softening some and gaze lingering on Vivi. “Particularly since my wife passed. It can be quite lonely for the both of us.”

Then his attention turned to Nami, a broader smile returning to his lips.

“That’s why I’m glad Vivi was able to meet such a wonderful friend here in Logue Town,” he said. “It’s not often either of us can make such lasting connections. We’ve left many people behind.”

Zoro watched as Nami looked torn between feeling completely flattered or flustered at the compliment, her gaze repeatedly shifting to Vivi, who looked equally embarrassed and shy about her father’s words.

It was so fucking weird to see Nami so quiet and polite. But Vivi seemed to have that effect on her. Zoro had seen how much softer and more relaxed the redhead always was when he saw them together at school.

He himself had no idea where this was going, only that it was going somewhere, something that
Sanji seemed certain of as well, judging by the way he’d begun to grow more solemn in his stance, losing the charming grin and hospitable attitude now that the attention was off him.

The conversation continued, Mr. Nefertari detailing some of his diplomatic work as an ambassador, involving Vivi when describing their time in Greece and Italy, most of which Zoro began to tune out, only catching bits and pieces.

But he didn’t miss the jealous glint Nami was getting in her eye the more they talked about their travels. It was no secret how much Nami wanted to do just that. She’d tolerate a different school every week if it meant she could globetrot.

“---When Vivi learned of this lovely home you have here, it certainly led for a long dinner conversation. You’re doing great work, Ms. Nico,” Cobra was saying, and this was the point Zoro’s attention snapped back.

Sanji seemed to sense something big as well, because his eyes flicked to Zoro’s, the two exchanging a silent anticipation.

It was little more than a look, but still Zoro felt a surprising connection there that lingered even after Sanji averted his eyes first.

He let out a breath, trying to redirect his focus to Robin, now busy thanking Vivi’s dad.

“It’s the very least I can do, to pay it forward,” she said, looking at Nami with a fond smile. “I deeply want these children to have a better childhood than I did.”

This statement seemed to be news to Sanji, Zoro, and Nami, all three of them reacting with furrowed brows, surprise mixing with confusion. They knew next to nothing about Robin’s past prior to her volunteering at Sunny…

But there wasn’t time to react, because Mr. Nefertari had leaned forward a little in his seat, clearly on the verge of saying something.

“I’ve done a bit of research, and I understand the children living here are all eligible for foster care. I’m sure there is much to complete in the application process. And there may be some obstacles with the nature of my job. Not to mention obtaining a new passpo---” he stopped himself, smiling at his daughter. “Well, Vivi, would you like to…?”

He gestured at Nami, whose eyes had begun to grow very wide, especially when Vivi turned on the couch to face her fully, reaching out to take her hand with a smile that was both encouraging and a little nervous.

“Nami,” she said, after taking a deep breath. “Ever since…you told me you lived here, I….well…” Vivi shook her head, resolution overcoming her features before she looked her friend in the eye and declared, “I know it’s a little farfetched. But I want you to come to Egypt with us.”

Zoro wasn’t sure what happened after that, only that he’d seen just a glimpse of the tears filling Nami’s eyes, the way she lunged at Vivi with a tight hug. He’d felt blank seeing it happen. Because he’d known it would. He just hadn’t known how.

And there were more important things to worry about. Like the fact that, as soon as Vivi voiced her desire, Sanji had turned and strode from the room without a word, through the kitchen towards the back door.

He dodged Franky and the boys, gaze downcast, when they came barreling in from the garage,
bottles of cola in hand and grins back on their faces, even after their tearful goodbye with Brook just earlier that afternoon.

“Oh, hey! Vivi’s here! Hi, Vivi!” Luffy had screeched upon catching a glimpse of their guests, bursting his way in on their discussion, and no one thought anything of it when the blond slipped out the back door alone, out into the backyard.

No one but Zoro, that is, who left the living room as well when the small gathering became a veritable crowd.

He didn’t know if Sanji would appreciate him following him, and he wasn’t entirely sure what compelled him to go anyway, just that he had.

He didn’t even know what he would say as he made his way outside and crossed the grass, watching Sanji heading to the treehouse which sat nestled among the thick branches of the large Adam wood tree near the edge of the forest.

The thing was impressive, painted red just like the house, and despite helping to fix it up when it needed maintenance, neither of them ever came out here much.

It had become a clubhouse for the younger boys anyway, covered in silly signs made by Usopp. ‘Brave warriors only,’ or ‘Home of the Pirate King,’ peppered with Chopper’s cute decorations and Luffy’s crude cave drawings.

Franky had built a sturdy ladder into the very trunk of the tree for extra stability, and Sanji disappeared up the hatch to the lower level before Zoro made it halfway across the yard.

But he still heard the frustrated huff and the dull thud of what sounded like something soft hitting the wall.

Zoro followed him, deciding he’d rather have the blond kick him out physically than not have tried. Maybe he wasn’t the most sentimental guy, and fucking feelings still made him squirm. But he was done pretending he didn’t care. He wasn’t afraid to let the others see it, so why the fuck should Sanji be any different?

He hoisted himself up the ladder, tattered sneakers pushing off the little rectangular logs nestled into the tree trunk, and he poked his head up through the hatch in the floor.

Sanji was sitting across the small space, on the window seat, and there was a pile of floor pillows scattered near the wall, no doubt the result of his own destruction.

He’d curled himself up, leaning against the wall of the little annex, gaze fixed firmly on the line of trees out the circular window. The window was cracked, so the breeze lifted Sanji’s hair gently, but it only served to make him rub at his visible eye miserably before letting out a heavy sigh.

“Go away, mosshead,” he groaned without looking at the green head that had sprouted from the floor.

Zoro merely rolled his eyes and pulled himself up into the room the rest of the way, perching on the edge of the hatch and letting feet dangle.

“Make me,” he replied, wondering if he couldn’t bait the blond into an argument to take his mind off things.

“Ugh…you’re so annoying…” Sanji huffed immaturely, but he made no such move to do as Zoro
challenged, knocking his head back against the wall and closing his eyes.

Zoro couldn’t help a tiny smirk, leaning back on a palm. He nearly crushed a bunch of strewn markers littered across the big patterned rug, so he shoved them aside and watched them skitter across the skull-and-crossbones print.

It brought his mind back to what he’d said to Sanji earlier, that he needed to off himself in the game. That he absolutely should because—well, it was obvious to Zoro how much he wanted out of here. Even if they all had a pretty good life at Sunny compared to a lot of kids in their situation, Zoro supposed it was the sense of belonging that Sanji wanted above everything. A place to call home for the rest of his life….

And unlike a lot of them, apparently Sanji had been with his birth parents right up until he was brought to Sunny. That was all Zoro knew, but it had to fuck with him emotionally…

Zoro sighed, then slumped down onto his back, crossing arms beneath his head and making himself comfortable.

He didn’t know what he was waiting for. He wasn’t going to make the guy talk. But to him, there had always been something comforting about another presence, even a silent one.

He’d always felt better around the others when he was younger. Maybe he didn’t say anything himself, but knowing that they were there helped. It made him feel less alone.

Would Sanji feel the same…?

He shouldn’t be getting so fucking worked up. He should be happy that he’d helped Nami, that now she had this amazing opportunity, but he couldn’t shake the immense sadness that gripped him.

Sanji hated the feeling of getting left behind. He couldn’t help it when there was so much of it during his childhood, particularly after his mom’s death. His brothers had gotten everything from their father, every chance to be great. Even his sister, despite her tolerance for him, had reaped the benefits of their father’s love.

And maybe he was in a better situation than his brothers now, not stuck in a detention center for their violence and behavioral issues, but it still hurt, wondering if there was any future for him at all.

And on top of everything, Zoro wouldn’t leave him alone now….

He turned his head to glance over at the mosshead, who hadn’t moved for a long time since he’d followed him. The idiot had sprawled out on his back, eyes now closed, and he was starting to snore lightly.

He really could fall asleep anywhere, couldn’t he…

Sanji sighed, deciding to pick apart everything weird about the guy while he was incapacitated. It would take his mind off this stupid unshakable angst. He knew he shouldn’t be sulking this much…but this damn game was dredging up too many suppressed emotions…

He watched the shallow rise and fall of Zoro’s chest, absently wondering when the last time he’d showered was. He remembered seeing that hoodie in the wash a week ago, but had anything on his person seen soap since then?

Why had he followed him anyway, if all he was going to do was pass out?
It was like he was trying to pressure Sanji into doing something, in his silent Zoro way, only the cook didn’t know what.

Was it about what he’d said to him after their visit with Sharley? Was he trying to get him to help himself, as he’d insisted? Because Sanji was starting to think he needed a fucking break from this game. He’d only been at it a few days, and already it was bringing him down so much, exhausting him emotionally.

He needed to give himself a chance to actually feel happy about his decisions, come to terms with them.

And he wanted Zoro to know this so maybe the weirdo would stop hanging on his tail nonstop.

Sanji got to his feet, feeling a little stiff from staying curled up as he had. He’d sat there longer than he’d planned on, especially when he noticed how much pink had seeped into the sky as the sun made its way down.

He crossed the room, treading carefully around some discarded Legos before he found himself standing over Zoro, who didn’t even stir. In fact, he only began to snore louder, and Sanji contemplated stuffing a pillow over his face to make him stop. He got enough of that god-awful noise in the middle of the night, thank you very much.

Instead, he lifted a foot and jammed his shoe into Zoro’s stomach hard, a smirk turning to a full-blown grin when the idiot snapped awake in alarm and doubled over on himself, coughing.

“Rise and shine, mosshead,” he teased, watching as Zoro sat up and fixed him with a groggy glare before his expression, oddly, faltered a bit upon seeing the look of devilish mirth on Sanji’s face.

After a moment, he reached out to try and snatch Sanji by the ankle, almost experimentally, but the blond danced away easily and gave a chuckle at the way Zoro’s hair stuck up in fifteen different directions.

“The hell is that look, idiot?” Sanji asked. “You fall asleep in weird places, you’re just asking to get kicked.”

Zoro blinked, suddenly becoming aware of his wide eyes and gaping jaw, which he quickly snapped back into a scowl, looking away a little self-consciously.

“Nothing, s’just….the first time I’ve seen you smile since this thing started. ‘Scuse me if it’s a damn shock,” he muttered, scratching at his chest.

“I’ve got a lot on my plate, asshole,” Sanji grumbled in response, losing said smile, though it was more forced than anything. “I don’t exactly have time to be joking around.”


“Wha---” Sanji stammered, unable to form words for a second. “Nothing’s keeping you here, idiot! If anything, I was stuck here ‘cause you blocked the damn exit!”

Zoro flicked eyes back to him, and he actually felt his face heat for seemingly no reason. But then again, he kind of did know the reason.

There had been a lot keeping him there, but the cook was either oblivious as ever, or simply didn’t care…
“Whatever…” Zoro sulked, embarrassed, and he turned so he could start back down the ladder.

Feet landed on the grass a little harder than necessary, the mosshead stalking away from the tree so Sanji didn’t jump on him or something, just to spite him.

If Sanji didn’t want to open up or accept, just for a second, a bit of companionship, then fine. Let the guy wallow.

Zoro had just thought that maybe, because he was the only one who knew about the game, that---

“You think Vivi’s still here…?” Sanji’s voice asked quietly from where he’d come up beside Zoro, hooking thumbs in his pockets and fixing his gaze on his feet, which he scuffed along the ground.

Zoro’s shock from the simple question was rather obvious, not having expected the blond to say anything more to him.

It showed when he stammered, struggling to come up with an answer for a good few moments.

“Uh…” he started, then shook his head, determined not to elicit any caveman jibes from the blond. “Dunno...maybe.”

Sanji made a soft noise of acknowledgment, and suddenly, the silence between them was plunged into awkwardness, something that, surprisingly, hadn’t happened the whole time they’d been involved in this shit together.

But then again, they hadn’t exactly been trying to converse normally, and it was clear neither quite knew how.

Zoro cleared his throat, a decision he regretted when it ended up sounding quite obviously like an attempt to fill the silence, which he’d been so fine with only minutes ago in the treehouse.

“Isn’t...Egypt supposed to be like….really hot?” he eventually said, resisting the urge to wince at his own social incompetence.

Sanji had turned to look at him, quirking a brow.

“Uh huuuuuh,” he said slowly, like Zoro was a fucking child. “And Antarctica is really col---”

“Shut up, I know that,” Zoro snapped in return, embarrassed yet again, the insecure part of him wondering why he’d wanted this interaction so badly. “I just mean ‘cause I bet Nami’s gonna bitch about the heat.”

“Hey! Watch your damn mouth, mosshead!” Sanji growled. “Nami is a lady! She doesn’t bitch---!”

Wrong thing to say, apparently, and now, Sanji was pissed, but so was Zoro, hating his stupid defensive attitude about anything female.

“Che,” he scoffed. “Guess you’re right. You’re the one who bitches…”

“What?!?”

A screech left Sanji, cracking his voice rather spectacularly, and Zoro couldn’t help it. He burst out laughing. Nevermind that he himself was in the throes of puberty as well.

Even when the blond wound up a leg and kicked him hard behind the knee, knocking him to the ground and tackling him to his back, he didn’t let up.
Sanji stood over him, one foot on either side of his stomach, and the blond fisted a hand in his shirt, yanked him up and growled in his face like a playground bully.

But Zoro merely snickered and grinned, even more so when he noticed the way Sanji tried so hard to suppress one of his own. He knew that look, after all, saw it mostly when the idiot dealt with Luffy or Usopp. That pretend irritation…

He’d just never seen it directed at him before.

Sanji’s fist gave him a hard shake for good measure before he dropped him, stepping over the mosshead and heading back towards the house.

It took Zoro a longer moment to recover, the teen pushing up to his elbows to watch the blond retreat, a little baffled by what had just happened, despite inciting it himself with his laughter.

He wondered if he’d imagined that look on Sanji’s face…

Until the blond glanced back over his shoulder briefly before entering the kitchen.

No, Zoro definitely didn’t imagine that smirk.

Fuck.

Two weeks later…

Two weeks was a long time for a game to sit abandoned. Usually by that point, it would be considered a lost cause, its owner too preoccupied with other things to get back into playing.

And the hiatus may have started out of Sanji’s desire to step away, regroup himself and try to come to terms with all he’d brought upon the household, unbeknownst to anyone but Zoro.

But, ultimately, the game had gone forgotten because of other things, namely the very real things happening in his own life.

Nami was going. She was actually going with Vivi and her dad, despite the tough case it had been to convince the social services office to let her leave the country. Even if Mr. Nefertari had passed his foster care application process with flying colors, the reluctance had been real, but thankfully, it had also been his affluence and kind charm that had reassured them.

And so, Nami was leaving that weekend, not to Egypt yet, but she was still moving in with Vivi and her dad, much to everyone’s sadness, and while it still affected Sanji, something else had made him feel better about the situation.

Many little things had helped---Brook’s calls, for one, his Instagram videos and photos of the tour, showing the impressive venues he and Laboon’s band were playing, complete with excessive hashtag use now that the old man was starting to get the hang of social media.

Nami herself had helped as well, talking to him of her excitement. She’d messaged her older “sister” from her previous foster home of her plans, happiness back in her eyes, not to mention the return of her teasing and take-charge demeanor. Not that Nami was bossy, no, never, but it was nice to see her order around the main source of Sanji’s own attitude improvement.

And it was a source he didn’t want to admit even existed, but he couldn’t exactly deny it because
things had definitely begun to change, and the entire house had noticed.

Particularly when they came home from school and Zoro parked himself in the kitchen as was becoming typical these days, openly demanding food and irritating the blond for fun, no longer retreating directly to their bedroom and holing himself there for hours.

“Oi. Curly. Where’s that grilled cheese. Let’s go.”

“Would you shut up about that?” Sanji growled, flipping open the fridge door and pulling out a pitcher for *drinks*, not fucking *grilled cheese*. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“You didn’t reply to my notes! I sent you, like, three in homeroom!”

“It was not three!” Sanji huffed, slamming down the pitcher dramatically on the table, abandoning it briefly as he stalked around the counter to Zoro’s side, practically ripped open his backpack and dumped out a whole hoard of crumpled-up papers onto Zoro’s lap which had the mosshead’s crude chicken-scratch handwriting, some with gross doodles. All demanding stupid grilled cheese.

“You kept them,” was all Zoro replied with, grinning proudly.

“Because what the fuck was Mr. Foxy gonna think if I dumped out all this damn paper in the trash!” the blond justified, leaving Zoro with the paper mess and returning to the forgotten pitcher of juice. “Honestly, why do you want grilled cheese? Of all the things…”

“I dunno,” Zoro shrugged. “Can you put onions on it?”

“Onions?! You pig! Who puts onions on grilled cheese!”

“Oh, you’re making grilled cheese? I’ll take one, Sanji~”

The two looked up to see Nami striding into the kitchen, a manipulative glint in her eye that Zoro recognized, but certainly not Sanji.

“Ah! Of course, Nami~” he crooned, quickly whirling away to gather bread and supplies as if he’d been planning on it all along.

“Oh, sure!” Zoro scoffed loudly, taking one of the wads of paper and throwing it hard at Nami, who merely brushed it away casually as she moved to get a drink. “Only when she asks! Do you see how many fucking notes I wrote, woman?!”

“That’s cute, Zoro,” Nami replied, not even looking up at him as she poured herself a glass of juice before glancing up at Sanji, already buttering bread in preparation for the stove. “Sanji, Vivi said thank you for the sphinx cookies~”

“She’s quite welcome~” the blond replied, nearly flopping over backward like a noodle in his haste to grin at her.

Zoro snorted. “Sphinx cookies…”

“Something to say about it, Zoro?”

But Zoro didn’t have time to reply to the cook before, from the garage, in came Luffy, bouncing with urgency.

“Hey, Sanji! We need somethin’ good an’ sweet for Chopper! Gotta have it now!” the boy cried, for once not begging for food himself, and that should have been reason enough for concern.

“And me!”

“Shut up, mosshead.”

“He just got off the bus and he’s crying,” Luffy replied, an odd seriousness in his eyes that usually only appeared when something was wrong with his friends. “We’ve gotta cheer him up.”

This had all three of the older teens looking up, Sanji setting down his knife, and Nami lowering her drink.

“Why is he crying.”

Zoro’s was the first voice to break the silence, and it was less a question than a low-key threat, to thoroughly annihilate whatever the reason was.

Luffy turned to look at him, a sense of unspoken responsibility passing between them silently. It was no secret how fiercely protective Zoro could be about the youngest of their bunch.

“Don’t know for sure,” Luffy answered. “Think it was bullies again. Usopp’s out with him now. And Robin. Where’s Franky?”

“He went out to the hardware store a bit ago,” Nami supplied, now looking worried as well, her eyes flicking to Sanji, the blond meeting her gaze with mutual concern.

A moment later, and he sighed, turning down the heat on the stove a little and moving to the cupboard to grab a jar of Nutella.

“Nami, mind if I get to this first…?”

“Not at all…” she replied.

Five minutes later, Chopper was sat at the counter, tearfully munching on a gooey, melted Nutella sandwich, courtesy of Sanji, all grilled cheese forgotten as the five older kids hovered around, Robin on the phone in the other room, trying to get through to Chopper’s guidance counselor.

“Th-Thanks, Sanji,” the boy said, sniffling as Usopp rubbed a hand over his back and Zoro brushed his arm against his, on the stool beside him.

“Don’t sweat it, Chopper,” the blond replied from across the counter with a tiny attempt at a smile. “Just tell us who we need to beat up.”

Chopper’s face blanched slightly, brown eyes going wide.

“I-I don’t want you to beat people up ‘cause of me…” he stuttered, something that had Zoro shift closer quietly, leaning his head down to meet the boy on his level.

“Chopper, this is the third time…” was all he said, in a soft tone usually only reserved for the younger kid.

The boy blinked at him owlishly, cheeks puffed out with bites from his sandwich….until his eyes watered again, and he nodded slowly.

“I know…” he mumbled miserably, looking down, and it was enough to have Zoro letting out a
breath and plopping a hand onto Chopper’s head to ruffle through curly hair affectionately.

It was obvious just how strong the kid was trying to be about all this. And he was being strong, but...there came a point when enough was enough.

Sanji knew this too, and he wasn’t surprised when Zoro’s eyes lifted to his gravely in a way they hadn’t for a few weeks.

The blond’s mind shot instantly to his unused 3DS up in his room, stuffed in the bin under his bed and neglected.

Shit.

Just then, from the living room, Robin strode in, her phone pressed to her ear.

“One moment, Miss Kureha. I’ll put him on right now,” she said, Chopper having raised his head a little at the mention of that name.

Robin smiled kindly, touched Chopper’s arm gently, and passed him the phone, which he brought up and answered with a shaky, “H-Hello?”

He was greeted by a rather grating voice on the other end that all of them heard, even though they couldn’t make out the woman’s words, and, after listening for a minute, he slid off his stool, took the rest of his sandwich and shuffled from the room.

“Guidance counselor?” Nami asked, taking a napkin and reaching across to wipe at some of the crumbs Chopper had left behind, Sanji shooting her an appreciative smile.

“No. The school nurse, as a matter of fact,” Robin replied. “Apparently, he’s become rather close with her out of mere interest in her profession. Now I know why he’s nearly missed the after-school bus so frequently.”

Her gaze shifted to the dirty pan and knives that sat, yet unwashed, in the sink, and she nodded gratefully at Sanji.

“I’m sure he’ll be alright, thanks to all of you,” she assured, touching a hand to Zoro’s shoulder before following after Chopper again.

“Damn straight,” Luffy declared, a determined look on his face as he marched from the room after her, followed by Usopp, hastily agreeing and grandly professing his dedication to the cause.

That again left Zoro, Nami, and Sanji together in the rather heavy silence that followed their friends’ exit.

“Kids are the worst...” Nami muttered, plopping her chin into her hand and swirling her drink around, a troubled expression on her face. “Wish there was more we could do...”

Zoro merely grunted in response, eyes not having left Sanji since they’d landed on the blond a minute ago.

There was a tightness in Sanji’s chest, but this time, Zoro’s silent imploring merely filled him with purpose...

What progress have they made in two weeks? They’ve survived without losing anyone else for that
long, but how is that an accomplishment when they have lost so profoundly.

Two weeks of grueling travel, of getting lost several times and backtracking by accident because none of them have a damned clue how to navigate. Robisia can infer vague directional clues from their surroundings, but it’s often not enough, and it’s clear who they need.

But she’s gone, and it doesn’t matter how fiercely determined Luffient acts, how much Chonrad and Usio try to pretend they haven’t cried themselves to sleep for nights and nights. It doesn’t matter how steelled and reserved Robisia has become, as a coping mechanism, or how many upgrades Sir Francus tries to add to their armor.

And it certainly doesn’t matter how many times Sir Zorin tries to tell him it’s not his fault.

If it hadn’t been for Sanjius, Namilia would still be alive. And so would Brokard.

It’s been a long journey, and they don’t seem to be any closer to Whole Cakia, at least not from their perspective, when all they can see are endless forests and mountains that are thoroughly exhausting their horses and their spirits.

Sanjius hates that he had to leave her, as he left Brokard, albeit in the kind and respectful hands of the villagers, but that wasn’t the tribute or burial she should have received. He should have gone with her, accompanied her back to her old village with proper ceremony, to be with her sister again…..where her mother was buried.

But he couldn’t do even that safely with the kingdom under siege, so he’d had no choice but to trust the villagers, trust that they would help him get her home.

And now he is numb, trying to keep himself from falling deeper into self-loathing when there are still people alive who need him. And yet, how long will it be until they too fell prey to his own incompetence as a leader…?

It’s obvious none of them want to split up anymore, not even to hunt, but sometimes it’s necessary, and it’s during those times that anxiety runs the highest, when one of their party is out of sight and therefore in very real danger, as far as they know.

This is the tense feeling that runs through their camp now. They have stopped themselves outside another tiny mountain village, only wanting to stay long enough to rest the horses and check their supplies.

Robisia and Chonrad, accompanied by Francus and Usio, have left to search for a medicinal herb that apparently grows at this high elevation, and the remaining three of them are waiting with growing concern, the longer it takes for them to return.

They’re in a large clearing, a location that should be beautiful, vibrant blue flowers peppering the ground, not unlike a swaying ocean, the mountains rising up on either side of the valley. But all Sanjius can see in them are huge, looming waves that hover there, threatening to crash down on them at any moment.

Zorin justified the location as a place where they could see any enemies coming from a mile away, though Usio was quick to point out just how invisible many of the deathly wraiths have been. At the very least, they haven’t come across any human enemies yet.

Luffient wanders away alone to the edge of the clearing, and Sanjius can see the tension in his stance as he watches those trees for any sign of his friends’ return.
He’s been blaming himself for Namilia’s death, even if Sanjius knows he shouldn’t.

But then again, they all are, in a way, because he sees the way Zorin almost always refuses to sleep, likes to keep himself within defending distance of everyone at once, if he can.

And despite their argument outside Sharlille’s hut, he’s been doing the same for the prince, though Sanjius hasn’t found it in him to complain. They’ve hardly spoken since then, but there’s something about Zorin’s companionship and loyalty that’s begun to affect him.

Maybe it’s his desperate want to have all of this off his own shoulders, but Zorin’s presence has certainly become a comfort rather than an annoyance.

And that’s how he’s feeling now, despite his paranoia over his friends’ safety.

He stands, running a brush absently over Siren’s hide as she grazes, Zorin tending to Wado and Kitetsu a short distance away.

And when the prince sighs and leans in to press his forehead to the mare’s shoulder, he can feel Zorin’s eyes flick to him almost immediately, even without looking up.

It’s only another second before there’s a shuffling, the clink of Zorin’s full upper-body armor, which he’s started to wear more diligently, despite the slight hindrance to his movement. And then, bootsteps through the grass that stop on Siren’s other side.

He says nothing though, just stands there, and his presence and his stare are so imposing that Sanjius lets out another breath before lifting his head.

“Your gaze is painful, you know that?” he mutters, to which Zorin snorts and looks down to watch Siren’s golden nose snuffle along the ground.

Another long moment of silence, until Sanjius eventually murmurs, “Do you think they’re alright...?”

Zorin neither confirms nor denies this, merely shrugs and says, “They haven’t sent a distress signal. Think we’d hear if there was a battle…”

It’s not much of a good thing, but Sanjius supposes it’s something, though his gaze can’t help but drift to where Luffient still paces anxiously on his own. It’s an odd sight given the knight captain’s usually carefree demeanor.

“Got any cheese?” Zorin suddenly asks, and it’s so unexpected that Sanjius actually lets out a dry laugh automatically in reply.

“We’re saving it for tonight,” he mutters. “Are you really that famished?”

Rather infuriatingly, Zorin just shrugs again and says nothing.

But there’s a look on his face, his brow furrowing, and it’s such a troubled look that Sanjius feels a spike of worry within him. It’s like he’s trying to work through something in his mind, a rarity compared to his usual lack of emotion.

Sanjius has just enough time to wonder what he’s thinking when, suddenly, there’s a high-pitched screech from the forest, one that’s all too familiar and has his heart leaping to his throat, the two of them nearly breaking their necks with how quickly they face the trees.
Luffient calls out urgently, just before there’s the thundering of hooves, Chonrad, on his horse, bursting forth into the clearing first, followed swiftly by Usio, Robisia, and Francus.

They’re all intact, but there’s little time to celebrate, because hot on their trail is a group of floating wraiths, darting straight for them.

“I’m sorry!” Chonrad exclaims, looking terrified. “It’s my fault! I went too far in their territory!”

But it doesn’t matter, because weapons are drawn, and his friends don’t hesitate to rush to his defense, staying close and fighting together to make quick work of their attackers.

Sanjius lets his mind go blank save for his own survival instincts because if he thinks too much, he will only hear Namilia’s final pained scream. He’ll only long to see her fighting alongside them, her light magic shooting through enemies and her weather clouds raining down destruction.

He needs to focus, especially when Chonrad is singled out by the demons across the clearing, despite his valiant efforts to fight back. The wraiths can sense his fear and they are quick to prey on it until he is nearly overwhelmed.

Zorin’s panic is obvious, as he nearly has his head lopped off by a low-swiping sickle in his desperation to check on the young knight, and he seems torn between staying close to Sanjius and rushing to Chonrad’s aid.

Sanjius makes a split-second decision, just as it seems Chonrad’s situation is hopeless.

He whistles for Siren, who obediently reaches his side quickly, the brave horse loyal even in battle, and he jumps into the saddle, giving her a kick until he’s racing across the clearing, straight towards Chonrad’s attackers.

He hears the alarm in Zorin’s voice when he calls out after him, but he ignores it, only concerned with getting to Chonrad on time.

Siren gallops towards the struggling knight. Sanjius slips a foot recklessly from the stirrup, and then, just as he nears the wraiths, he stands, pushes his free foot off the saddle and leaps off Siren’s back to aim a flying kick straight for them.

His foot connects with the first wraith’s sickle, redirecting the weapon to plunge it into another two of its brethren, which disappear in an explosion of smoke, chilling screams echoing in the empty space.

He manages to land on the ground with a roll to give himself momentum before he’s up again, sprinting towards the last of the wraiths with a vengeance and another fearsome attack ready.

Between Chonrad’s lance and his own projectile of a kick, the last wraith is destroyed as well, and all is quiet.

He stands there, both him and Chonrad panting heavily opposite each other, and though his mind and limbs are buzzing from the attack, Sanjius quickly turns his head to find the others stopped as well, no more wraiths in sight.

Zorin’s eyes are on the two of them, a look of rare, unabashed relief on his face.

And that’s when Chonrad bursts into tears.
It’s a long while before he calms down, and frankly, absolutely none of them can fault him for it, especially not when Francus and Usio tear up as well, Luffient gathering Chonrad in a tight embrace and holding him like his life depends on it.

Robisia stands solemnly with a hand on Chonrad’s shoulder, a mix of relief and sorrow on her stoic features, and Zorin hovers close as well, clearly thankful Chonrad escaped unscathed.

Sanjius is standing there, his jaw clenched tightly to keep himself composed.

“We should keep moving,” he eventually murmurs quietly once things have calmed a bit, and the others have slowly extracted themselves from the bubble of grief that overcame them.

Just as slowly, they start readying themselves again, exhausted, both physically and emotionally, but they’ve all lived to see another day, and for that, they should be glad.

As their small band disperses somewhat to prepare their own horses, Sanjius isn’t too surprised to see Zorin quietly helping Chonrad, eventually holding him close when the teen falls into him and wraps arms around him.

He can’t hear what Zorin is saying, but it’s the way the older knight knocks his forehead against Chonrad’s brown curls, murmurs close to his ear, eliciting a quick nod and an attempt to get himself back into order from Chonrad… all of it is so soft, so protective and caring. The prince knows the two are close, but it’s moments like this when it really becomes apparent. It’s a side of the knight seldom seen...

Zorin eventually claps a hand supportively onto Chonrad’s shoulder, passes him off to Usio, and Sanjius jolts when the green-headed knight starts to make his way over to him.

Sanjius quickly averts his gaze, lowers it to Siren’s girth, which he’d been adjusting, eager to hide the fact that he’s been staring at the knight for minutes on end.

He waits until Zorin comes up right beside him to finally glance over, though he pretends to still be distracted.

Zorin sucks in a breath, shifts a bit awkwardly, and what he finally says is unexpected to the prince.

“Thank you…” he murmurs quietly, and when Sanjius looks up at him, eyes widening a bit, Zorin’s face actually goes a little red, and he can’t seem to maintain eye contact for long. “I just—for saving Chonrad… you were stupid for running in there like that, but---he would’ve—I think—it would’ve been over if you hadn’t been there…”

Sanjius doesn’t reply, just gapes at Zorin for a second before eventually averting eyes too and nodding.

“Well… exactly. I couldn’t let that happen…” he mumbles, feeling awkward himself. He never wanted to be praised for simply protecting his friends.

He wonders if that’s all Zorin’s going to say, but the knight actually seems to be working up to something else, lifting a hand and rubbing it at the back of his neck.

“All about…what you said…back then…at the witch’s place. Fighting for you and all that…” he says. Then, with a huffed exhale, he meets the prince’s gaze head-on.

“I never thought you were weak… I know you can fight,” Zorin continues seriously. “It’s...
me.” He sighs. “I’m the one who couldn’t handle it if you got hurt…”

Sanjius feels a strange clenching in his chest, and he suddenly has a rather foolish urge to reach out and touch his knight. Just gently, to comfort him, reassure him when he shouldn’t have that uncertain look on his face.

He doesn’t, of course, but the fact that the urge even strikes him is surprising enough to fluster him.

But Zorin is serious; Zorin has put himself out there emotionally with this confession that makes no sense coming from someone he’s always thought didn’t care. And yet, it’s starting to become obvious how much he does, and always has…

“Keep fighting by my side then…” the prince murmurs eventually.

It’s all he can muster, but he hopes his tone is enough for the dim-witted swordsman to at least understand what he’s implying.

He trusts Zorin, with all of his friends’ lives...and with his own.

Zorin seems to get it, thankfully, the knight’s face going a little more red before he nods hastily, lets out a breath and gives Siren’s neck a pat. Then with one last flick of eyes meeting the prince’s, he moves away to check on the others.

Sanjius watches after him, and thus catches the way he looks back after a few paces, seems almost embarrassed as soon as he does and finds the prince watching him, because he quickly looks away again and continues off.

For the first time in a few weeks, the prince actually smiles a little.

Sanji snapped his 3DS shut, just as the dialogue box popped onto the screen proclaiming the level-up in his and knight-Zoro’s relationship. “B” now, and it left him feeling strange, as it hadn’t the first time, when he didn’t know what it entailed.

Dinner had passed. Chopper had, thankfully, cheered up after talking to Miss Kureha on the phone, and things had gone back to normal, save for the sounds of suitcases being zipped in Nami’s room, evidence of her packing.

Maybe Chopper had cheered up, but Sanji had still come up here with the intent to do away with him in the game—help him, in the end, because he knew they couldn’t let this happen again. The boy couldn’t come home in tears again, not even once. Chopper was so fucking smart and talented. He deserved so much better.

But he hadn’t gone through with it. At the last second, he’d moved his own character over to support Chopper’s, ended the battle without casualties.

And it was all because of Zoro, who was across the room on his bed, eyes closed, but clearly awake, earbuds playing music a lot more quietly than he used to.

Zoro’s affection for Chopper had stopped him, something he wouldn’t have cared about a few weeks ago, but now?

Thinking about how unhappy it might make him, to see the boy who was, essentially, like a little brother to him, leave, even if it meant his life would improve…?
He knew how he himself was feeling about Nami leaving, and the fact that he hadn’t wanted Zoro to feel those same things was a realization that was a little scary.

Zoro had to have known what he was up to, when he walked in the room earlier to find Sanji playing the game after so long, especially after those knowing looks he’d shot Sanji’s way when they sat in the kitchen with a miserable Chopper.

He knew and yet he didn’t say a word, just settled down on his own bed quietly.

Sanji tilted his head subtly to look at him, watched him adjust the volume on his iPhone, even with his eyes closed. He watched him until he heard the song end through his headphones, at which point Zoro finally opened his eyes to flick through to a new one.

Only then did Sanji huff out a breath and sit up, setting his 3DS aside.

His movement drew Zoro’s attention, the mosshead glancing over, then hastily pulling out his earbuds altogether and pushing up to elbows to give Sanji his full concentration.

“Did you…?” he asked, trailing off because surely Sanji would know what he was implying.

But he couldn’t help the look of shock that hit his face when the blond gave an exhale of frustration and shook his head.

“What?! Why not?” Zoro hissed, sitting up the rest of the way and swiveling legs off the side of his bed.

Sanji just floundered though, shrugging, mouth working for a reply that wouldn’t come right away. He dragged a hand through his hair.

“I just---” he started.

But then, confusing Zoro even more, he met the other teen’s gaze with a rather helpless expression.

“If Chopper leaves, are you---? Are you gonna be…?”

Zoro furrowed his brow, unsure what Sanji was getting at.

“Am I gonna be what…?” he asked slowly, with a hint of wariness to his voice.

Sanji just let out another frustrated huff though, rolled his eyes a bit.

“Are you gonna be okay with it? You and Chopper are fucking close!”

Zoro stared at him, lips parting slightly in disbelief at what he was hearing. He didn’t know if he and Sanji had been getting any closer in the past two weeks, certainly more comfortable with bitching at each other, but...was Sanji actually…?

“Hold on, you’re---worried about---what I’d think?” Zoro stammered.

“I’m not worried about it!” Sanji shot right back immediately. “I just wanna make sure it’s the right decision for everyone!”

“Yeah, but---you putting me in with everyone?”

“No, I---!”
But it seemed Zoro had him cornered, so Sanji gave a growl under his breath before finally admitting, “Okay, fine. Yes! But come on, Zoro, I just…”

He trailed off, lost for words and thoroughly mortified, his face heating as he glared hard at his closet door, the little duck plushie that hung on the doorknob.

His mom had given that to him when he was little, and dammit, he felt like a little kid again, awkwardly fumbling through an emotional block that mostly seemed to occur around the dumb mosshead these days.

Why was it only him that fucking unnerved him like this…?

“Don’t hurt yourself, Curly…” Zoro mumbled, picking at his bedsheets for a distraction, at the tiny balls of lint that accumulated over the black fabric.

He sighed then, realizing he was going to have to respond to this, even though his heart felt weird in his chest, and his stomach was twisting about.

“I want what’s best for Chopper, so yes, I’m okay with this,” he murmured, risking a glance at Sanji, a little relieved to see he was still looking away. “Whatever you decide to do….I’m okay with it….’cause I know you’ll do whatever’s right. You’ll make sure everyone’s okay…”

The words came out of him naturally, but, in the aftermath, when his mind caught up to his heart, Zoro immediately felt sheepish. He never spilled shit like that to anyone, let alone Sanji.

And then the blond’s eyes met his again, and his fluster increased tenfold, feeling the simple power of Sanji’s gaze that he was growing more and more weak to with each passing day.

Dammit.

“So you trust me…?” Sanji asked slowly, with an air of disbelief himself, and Zoro knew his answer already. He’d known it all along.

He wanted Sanji to help himself, desperately, but until he could convince the blond of such…

“Yeah…” Zoro answered, cheeks red but bravely facing the blond without shame. “Course I do…”

Sanji didn’t seem to know how to process Zoro’s words, the teen just kind of sitting there for a long minute before he eventually let out a breath, ran both hands through his hair, and flopped back onto his pillow.

“Shit,” he hissed, covering his eyes and cheeks in an attempt to hide the redness still there. “Okay, we’re done. Point taken, but we’re done. Too much…”

Despite his own embarrassment, Zoro’s lips turned up, and he quirked a brow playfully.

“Too many feelings?” he teased, to which Sanji screeched, “Yes, too many feelings! Since when are you so chill about this?!”

Zoro let out a short laugh, then pulled up legs and bellyflopped onto his own pillow as well.

“Trust me, m’not,” he mumbled into it, leaving his face smushed there for a minute until he turned his head to avoid suffocating….but also to peek over at Sanji.

The blond was busy staring at the ceiling, brow furrowed all over again.
“I shouldn’t have waited so long to play,” Sanji said eventually. “Could’ve ended this shit at his school way sooner…”

Zoro shrugged, slipping hands under his pillow and staying there with an almost shy gaze trained on the blond.

“Nami’s leaving. Wasn’t so easy to just keep going…”

This actually got Sanji to look over at him, the blond’s lips parting.

“You actually care about Nami leaving…?” Sanji asked, sounding skeptical.

Again, Zoro shrugged, burrowing deeper into his pillow so Sanji was barely visible behind the out-of-focus blur of fabric in front of his eyes.

“Maybe I care if you’re moping around ‘cause of her…” he mumbled into the fabric quietly, so quietly that Sanji rolled over to face him and shot back, “What was that?”

Zoro growled in annoyance, then pushed up himself to shout obnoxiously, “I said maybe I care if you’re moping around ‘cause of her!”

This actually earned him a pleased look on the other teen’s face, Sanji practically lighting up with smug glee.

“Why?” the blond prodded. “You worried about me?”

“Shut up! Because your moping is damn annoying! You’re like---the definition of teen angst!”

“Oh, you’re one to talk, mosshead! You’ve been brooding since you were ten years old! Plus you’re emo!”

“What?! I am not!” said-emo screeched, sending Sanji into a fit of cackling.

“Yes, you fucking---are! The shit music you listen to! Your stupid punk hair and ugly Hot Topic wardrobe! You’ve got everything short of eyeliner---!”

“Yeah? Well, at least I’m not a preppy asshole!”

That was the last straw.

Sanji had lunged at him, and even if it was to try and shove a pillow over Zoro’s irritating face, it was still an important event.

Because it was the first time Sanji had crossed that line of tape onto Zoro’s side…
This is a bad place for their crew to stop. A ruined, abandoned town, just beyond the border between Baratia and Whole Cakia.

Robisia had looked devastated, because apparently this had been a bustling border town, important for trade, and a cultural fusion of the two kingdoms, the first real welcome to the land of Whole Cakia, a town called Zoua.

Sanjius has heard tales of the place, rather fantastical tales—that the people of Zoua utilized magic. That many of them could transform into animals, becoming vital parts of the Whole Cakian army.

Except everything is gone.

Houses have been razed; buildings lie broken and dilapidated.

And there is not a single living soul in sight….

None of them know why this has happened, most of them in shock that a town that should have been a valuable stopping point to gather supplies just…doesn’t exist anymore.

In the darkness of the night, it’s an eerie sight, and this is where they’ve decided to stop, on the outskirts of the town, under the cover of the tall trees that seem to stretch their limbs and leaves out to shield the dead town itself.

They will explore tomorrow, try to find answers, but for now, they rest.

Sanjius is exhausted. He hasn’t slept (at least not well) for weeks. He has to stay awake. He has to make sure nothing harms his friends. He has to make sure the dreams of Namilia’s smile…..Brokard’s laugh….he has to make sure they don’t come.

But he’s probably doing more harm than good because, without rest, he could easily become a liability in battle. It’s dangerous…

But maybe just for a minute…

He settles back against a tree, pine needles on the forest floor at least providing some cushioning from the hard ground, and he listens to the sounds of his friends’ breathing as they too try and relax, also leaning against trees, or each other.

Soon, only Zorin and Chonrad are awake. It’s no surprise Zorin is, but Chonrad…usually the boy finds a comforting pillow on Luffient's lap.

But the prince hears their quiet murmurings from across their little camp, hears that soft, calming tone in Zorin’s voice that’s somehow becoming something he craves, for his own piece of mind too.

He sees their forms, barely silhouetted in the dim moonlight.

Zorin has his hand on Chonrad’s back, and Sanjius wonders if he’ll be able to make the younger boy smile. If anyone can, it’s Zorin…

He doesn’t plan on closing his eyes and drifting off to sleep, but it happens…
It is still dark out when the prince suddenly wakes, the sound of a faint shout rousing him, even over Francus and Luffient’s loud snoring.

It doesn’t disturb anyone else, but part of Sanjius wonders why. It’s possible he imagined it, his own paranoia and fear getting the best of him.

Until he notices, as his eyes adjust to the dark and he glances around the camp.…

Zorin and Chonrad are missing.

The prince’s heart leaps into his throat, and he doesn’t think about waking the others, doesn’t tell anyone where he’s going or have any concern for his own well-being when he throws his cloak off himself, scrambles to his feet, and runs into the forest. He doesn’t even know if he’s going the right way, just that Zorin and Chonrad are gone, and the last time one of their own separated from the group, they’d lost her….

Sanjius sprints blindly through the trees, nearly tripping over a few roots, knowing he should be listening for other noises, but finding it difficult beneath the pounding of his heart in his ears and the harshness of his breaths.

His eyes play tricks on him, glimpses of moving shadows rattling him despite being only branches, or disgruntled crows.

The air is cold and he feels it, straight through to his very core because the image is there in his brain. Zorin lying lifeless on the ground, his swords scattered uselessly, gone….just gone.

It’s horrible that this is what he fears, but perhaps it’s also logical. He knows, if Zorin is with him, Chonrad will be fine. But there’s no telling what Zorin will do to make sure that is the case.

More and more frantic, he can’t catch his breath, but still he runs, the air growing thicker with dread until a sound and a shadow to his left turn out to be very real---and very important.

He nearly stumbles in his haste to stop, his boot coming down hard on a discarded sickle, a wraith’s sickle.

And yet, he doesn’t even notice this fact, too preoccupied with the wave of relief that hits him, seeing none other than Zorin kneeling there on the ground, back facing him. But the prince knows it’s him, the moonlight glinting off the decorative gold of his sword hilts, his earrings that dangle like teardrops.

He looks to be shaking.

Sanjius sees a glimpse of Chonrad’s curly hair pressed into Zorin’s shoulder, his limp hand resting there in the dirt, illuminated and pale.

He realizes those are sobs shaking Zorin’s body, a split second before he finally registers the blood staining that fallen sickle, splattered, glistening, over the forest floor.

Sanjius falls to his knees.

For the first time since they were years younger and still plagued with nightmares and fresh sorrow, Nami had hugged him. Nami had actually hugged him tightly, clung to him as she said her goodbyes.

And though Sanji’s heart skipped, having her so close, and his face heated beyond his control, he’d
squeezed her back, kissed her cheek and told her he loved her, rather amazed with himself that he’d meant it in an entirely platonic way.

He did love her, and despite how beautiful he thought she was, he realized as she pulled away to permit a constricting hug from Luffy too, that he felt the same way now as he had saying goodbye to his sister all those years ago.

They’d taken him from their father first, knowing the neglect and abuse he’d suffered at a mere ten years old had been substantial compared to his siblings, and he hadn’t seen her since.

He still loved his sister, missed her. She’d been the only source of comfort to him in the years since their mother’s death, and her reliability as someone he could depend on grew stronger as they’d gotten older. She’d no longer sat idly by in the face of their brothers’ cruelty...

This was an entirely different situation now, with Nami leaving to live with Vivi. He wasn’t scared, and he had hope for her future. But those feelings were the same, the sibling bond that he knew wouldn’t break because of distance.

Nami even hugged Zoro, much to his embarrassment. She’d also patted his cheek a little too hard as she pulled away, causing him to scowl, but he didn’t call her a bitch, and that was certainly something.

Franky had driven her off, backseat of his Hummer piled high with Nami’s belongings, the rest of them standing on the porch until they disappeared, just as they had with Brook.

Sanji felt less hollow than before. He felt much lighter. His heart still ached with how much he was going to miss her, but it was becoming a good ache.

Maybe he was just growing used to this…

“Chopper, shall we get ready?” Robin asked, and the young boy nodded, smiling through his tears and following her back into the house, Luffy and Usopp trailing after with tears of their own, but also excited ramblings.

Yes, Sanji was definitely growing more used to this.

Because two days ago, of his own controlling, Chopper had stumbled off alone in his game, bait for the wraiths, Sanji keeping the rest of his little army stationed far away. And he’d let them pick him off.

It had been mere seconds afterward that Robin had received a phone call from the social services office. A certain Miss Kureha, nurse at Chopper’s school, had completed her application process and been approved as a foster parent. And she was interested in taking in Chopper, with talks of enrolling him in a special school, one better suited to and better understanding of his intellectual gifts.

Chopper had come home from school the next two days, smiling ear to ear, and now he and Robin were off to have an interview with Miss Kureha, even though both knew it wasn’t necessary. Chopper would gladly live with her. And with early memories of his father, lost to cancer when he was quite young, beginning to fade, Sanji knew this would be a second chance at having a real, forever home.

Sanji was genuinely happy for his friends, despite remaining uncertain about his own fate, and he wasn’t sure why.

Part of him was beginning to wonder if it was because he’d begun to develop a new sort of constant
in his life.....one that was now offering an endless source of annoyance, but also unwavering support.

He turned his gaze to Zoro who, unsurprisingly, hadn’t left the porch, still standing beside him. Sanji didn’t think anything of it now. In fact, it would have been weirder if the mosshead went back inside without another word.

Sanji sighed, noting that Zoro’s cheeks were still a little red from Nami’s hug. He kind of liked the way it brought out the tiny sprinkling of freckles on his nose. Huh….had Zoro always had freckles there?

“Think I might go to the pier,” said the blond, voicing thoughts out loud, his tone casual as he looked off down the hill to the street and the grass of the sand dunes on the other side.

He didn’t walk off though, just stood there, completely implying an invitation.

But Zoro said nothing, causing Sanji to flick eyes back to him, fixing the idiot with a pointed look and jerking his chin.

He said it again, with more emphasis, because his pride still wouldn’t let him simply ask the dumb mosshead.

“How cool are we talkin’?” Sanji asked, and Zoro shrugged.

“I dunno,” he answered helpfully.

Sanji gave him a skeptical look for a long moment, and Zoro wondered if maybe he’d say no.

But then he shrugged too and replied, “Fine. Let’s go.”

Zoro found it difficult to resist the urge to grin.

It was somewhat miraculous that, only about a half hour later, Sanji’s bike and Zoro’s skateboard rolled up to an empty parking lot near a remote end of the beach, a place that had once been bustling with touristy shops maybe ten years ago, but had since been abandoned when the nicer area of town expanded.

“We’re here,” Zoro declared, a little proud that it hadn’t taken him an hour to find as it often did.

And he half expected the look of utter bewilderment on Sanji’s face as he tried to make sense of the
barren landscape, the weeds growing around the tall fluorescent lampposts lining the lot, and the long-forgotten ruins of what looked to be an old surf shop, practically sitting on a bed of sand now from years of neglect.

The blond stared for a long moment, his eye twitching before he shifted it to Zoro.

“What the hell do you mean, we’re here?” he growled. “It’s a freaking parking lot---!”

“Shut up. Over here, dumbass,” Zoro replied, jerking his head to the opposite end of the lot which was lined by a gnarly chain-link fence, overgrown bushes completely enveloping parts of it.

But there was a clear section where the fencing was bent and cut loose from the post, allowing access to whatever lay beyond.

Sanji shot Zoro a slightly wary look, but he hopped off his bike and walked it over to the fence behind the mosshead, who stuck his skateboard under his arm and strode up without hesitation to pull it back.

“Ladies first,” he said, gesturing for Sanji to go through ahead of him, and he snickered, even when Sanji scowled and tried to ram his bike into Zoro’s shins.

Still, the blond ducked his head, carefully slipping through the opening, along with his bike.

To his complete surprise, on the other side, beyond a ragged patch of grass, was a vast abandoned skate park, its concrete half pipes and bowls weathered and rough, overgrown vegetation poking up through the cracks. Metal railings and small staircases rose up in other places. It was almost unclear which had been there first, the plant life or the structures, both seeming to weave in and out of each other with no telling of their history.

Yet, every concrete surface was covered in colorful graffiti, and not simply illegible words or patterns.

No, somehow, a theme had formed, so that every piece was of an animal. Ferocious ones were common, tigers and lions, wolves or bears. But there was everything. A snake slithering its way up a half-pipe wall, a flock of black birds using the ground as their sky, disappearing below the canopy of the bushes.

It was an ugly sight, or rather, it should have been, a complete eyesore that would normally raise disgust or disdain in a touristy community like theirs.

But Sanji didn’t think so. It was gritty and beautiful, and Sanji’s breath caught just looking at the mysterious lost jungle laid out before him.

“Whoa,” he breathed, all he could say really when his eyes were too busy feasting on the colors and movement that turned an otherwise drab place into something incredible.

“Right?” Zoro replied, his gaze not having left the blond the entire time.

He stepped forward then, purposely bumping his shoulder into Sanji’s and gesturing for him to follow again.

The blond watched Zoro walk for a few seconds, his sneakers treading over the huge image of a majestic-looking elephant that stretched out in front of them. Then he lowered his kickstand and left his bike near the entrance before striding after his friend.
"Watch it," the mosshead muttered over his shoulder as they walked. "Some of the concrete’s chipped. Don’t twist an ankle in the cracks."

And suddenly, Sanji had an idea of why Zoro had come home one day last year with both ankles all bruised…

He said nothing though, just followed Zoro to the edge of a deep, curving bowl which harbored a large image of an iguana on the opposite wall, smoking something that looked a lot like a blunt. Sanji had to snort in amusement.

But it didn’t seem this was what Zoro wanted to show him, as he didn’t point it out explicitly, just lowered himself to the ground at the lip of the bowl.

It was a good nine foot drop to the bottom, but even so, Zoro swung legs over the edge fearlessly, planted sneakers flat against the nearly vertical wall and slid himself down easily.

A bit of a run to catch himself at the end before he turned back to Sanji, who shot him a withering look, not moving just yet.

"Come on, Curly, don’t be a wuss," Zoro called up to him. "It’s better from down here."

Sanji didn’t know what was so much better from down there, but he wasn’t about to live up to the wuss name, so he lowered himself down with a bit more hesitation than Zoro had.

Zoro stepped closer, wondering if Sanji would really go for it or not. And despite his invitation and confidence, his heart still managed to clench fearfully when Sanji took a deep breath, then skidded himself down the side of the wall too.

He didn’t need to catch him, because Sanji managed just fine on his own, also jogging a few paces at the bottom to continue his momentum just before turning back to Zoro with a triumphant smirk on his face.…

Only to have his eyes widen and his mouth drop open a little when he realized just what he’d slid down the face of.

On the entire length of the wall that towered above them was a wide-stretching mural of a detailed underwater scene, complete with schools of tropical fish and coral reefs rising up, even from beneath their feet.

Its large scale meant it was immersive, and the mesmerized look that came over Sanji’s face had Zoro actually smile a little breathlessly. This proved him right. He’d always figured the weirdo cook would like it.

"Holy shit," Sanji was murmuring, stepping closer to look at a group of turtles swimming past. "Who the hell painted this?"

For some reason, on a whim, Zoro heard himself reply jokingly, “It was me.”

….To which Sanji instantly scoffed and shot back, “Oh, yeah right. Nice try, idiot,” stretching out a leg to kick the back of Zoro’s knee out just for fun.

But he was smiling as he walked a few paces away to admire some jellyfish, hearing the disgruntled noise that left the mosshead.

Zoro’s eyes fell on him again, and he realized that he was experiencing a moment he’d thought
would never happen. Never did he think the two of them would ever reach a point like this, when he could show him something that had reminded him of the blond ever since he’d first come across it.

An excitement stirred within him. For what, he didn’t know, but there was also a twinge of sadness.

How much longer would this last? How much longer until one of them, Sanji if he had his way, would move on as their friends were beginning to?

Of course, that was entirely up to Sanji, but Zoro did not like to think about how numbered their days together might be…

Sanji broke him from his thoughts, after a few minutes of admiring the impressive artwork, the blond suddenly rounding on Zoro again and coming up to him confidently, hands in his pockets until he removed one to reach out and give a little tug to the skateboard tucked under Zoro’s arm, knuckles brushing against Zoro’s skin as he did.

“Teach me this,” he demanded with a smirk. “I wanna try it.”

Zoro stared at him, skin tingling where Sanji had barely touched him, blinking in surprise for a moment before he quirked a brow.

“You really wanna fall on your ass?” he countered, to which Sanji rolled his eyes.

“I’m not a clumsy caveman like you, mosshead,” the blond insisted. “I’ll be fine.”

…

And he actually was, at least on the flat bottom of the bowl and on the edges of the slope. A little wobbly at first, leaning on Zoro heavily, digging his nails into his friend’s bare skin. But the blond’s good balance worked to his advantage as, with a bit of direction from Zoro, he was soon able to cruise around in circles, coasting over the menagerie of animals with growing confidence and speed.

“I’m good, right?” he gloated over to Zoro, who stood in the middle of the bowl looking irritated, mostly because of what a quick learner the guy was.

“You’re not getting low enough on the turns,” Zoro critiqued in response, mostly so Sanji’s head didn’t double in size.

The blond scoffed, then exaggerated his stance on the next curve to satisfy him before straightening and riding straight at Zoro.

The mosshead stumbled out of the way to the sounds of Sanji’s laughter, watching as Sanji kicked his foot off the ground to speed up even more, and Zoro realized a split second before it happened that he was going to try for a bigger ascent up the side of the bowl.

“Hey, watch it, Curly!” he huffed, feeling oddly nervous about this, even if, to his surprise, Sanji managed the first few back-and-forths just fine with a flick of his middle finger.

But Zoro couldn’t help the concern. In his experience, falls didn’t lead to good things… Maybe it had been years since her, but…..

Indeed, he’d been right to worry because it was during the sixth back-and-forth that Sanji goofed, hitting a slight snag in the concrete on his way down the ramp and not recovering in time, the board going shooting out from under him.
The blond could only yelp, hands automatically reaching out to catch himself but quickly retracting them at the last second, knowing it was a bad idea, and yet holding them protectively to his chest and bracing for the inevitable impact.

It came, but not as expected.

Instead of concrete, his body met with a sturdy chest and the gold Asura graphic on Zoro’s T-shirt. And then, the sensation of falling again as he realized Zoro was going down with him, the two of them landing hard on their shoulders, but surely softer than Sanji would have falling alone.

A grunt from Zoro upon impact was the only indication that the fall had affected him, Zoro’s arms providing a cushion for Sanji, and it took the blond a long minute to come to his senses---to become aware that the other teen’s hand had wrapped around his head to protect it, holding him close.

A few shaky breaths…

But then Sanji pushed up quickly to get a look at Zoro, cursing, “Shit,” when he saw the mosshead’s eyes squeezed shut and a grimace of pain on his face.

“You’re an idiot,” Zoro gritted out a second later though, sitting up too and rubbing at his arm. It might bruise later, but he seemed to be completely intact.

Still, Sanji’s hand shot out of its own accord to grab the mosshead’s other arm urgently.

“How are you?” he asked, eyes flicking up and down Zoro’s form.

The other teen’s gaze drifted to Sanji’s hand slowly, staring for a second. He tried to make eye contact with Sanji again, but couldn’t hold it for long, just looking away with a shrug.

“Come on, you know I can take a hit….” he mumbled, brushing it off entirely.

Zoro might have looked away, but Sanji didn’t, watching him closely in case he started coughing up blood or some shit. He didn’t though, and Sanji knew Zoro’s words were true. For years he’d known it. They’d fought with each other enough times to prove that.

And for those years, it had been with genuine animosity, or at least Sanji had thought.

But now, for some reason, gaze fixed on the sheepish way Zoro studied the ground, the redness of his ears, and with the lingering feeling of his fingers in his hair despite them being gone…..?

For the first time, Sanji wondered how much they’d missed out on because of those years…

Slowly, Sanji let his hand drop from Zoro’s arm, shaking his head a bit to get himself back to reality.

“Yeah, well. A hit from me can do some serious damage,” Sanji said, an attempt to keep it lighthearted, only adding, “Thanks, anyway,” when he’d averted his gaze to the fallen skateboard.

But a second later, he jolted, quickly scrambling in his deep shorts pocket where he’d slipped his 3DS earlier.

“Fuck,” he hissed, throwing open the device, scared for any damage, but it powered on just fine when he tried it, and Sanji couldn’t help but let out a sigh of relief.

Zoro watched him as he experimentally opened his mysterious game, noticing, for the first time, the diminishing party members Sanji had listed on the bottom screen. Where nine avatars had once flashed, there were now only six, and it hit home for Zoro….how much was really changing.
Sanji was flicking through all their stats absently, Zoro just noticing a ‘B’ hovering over his and
Sanji’s characters when he pulled them up side-by-side, seconds before the blond snapped his 3DS
shut with a huff.

“It’s fine,” Sanji said. “Not broken or anything.”

“What was that ‘B’?”

Sanji paused, halfway to putting the device back in his pocket.

“What?” he asked.

“The ‘B’ by our names,” Zoro clarified, reaching for the 3DS, though Sanji predictably held it away
from him. “What does that mean?”

“It just shows, like…that I’ve talked to your character, that’s all,” Sanji answered, a little too slowly
to be natural.

Zoro’s eyebrows shot up.

“You can talk to characters? Just a conversation?” he asked, and when Sanji tentatively nodded, he
pressed, “Talk to mine! I wanna see!”

“It’s no big deal!” Sanji insisted, still not opening his 3DS. “It’s usually just about the battles and
shit—”

“Yeah, the battles where you’ve been killing our friends,” Zoro said pointedly. “Just lemme see.”

He wasn’t sure why, but an odd self-consciousness had crept over the blond under Zoro’s
persistence, as it hadn’t since the first time he’d shown him the game. Zoro had seen him play before,
but he didn’t know what happened each time that letter rank ascended.

And Sanji also wasn’t sure which was affecting which…the game affecting real life…? Or
otherwise...

Still, there was one thought in his mind that finally had him huffing out a breath and opening his 3DS
once more.

He trusted Zoro. The real Zoro. Whatever happened….would happen.

The prince sees himself in Zorin. He sees the way he isolates himself, tries to distract himself from
the fact that they’ve just buried another dear friend by insisting he’ll do everything.

He will help search the abandoned town for supplies. He will take care of all the horses. He will
spar with whoever wants it for as long as they want. He will train himself to hell and back, swords
swinging into the night and felling already-crumbling buildings.

He will do everything but sleep.

And it takes a fierce reprimand from Luffient, who tells him he can’t think he’s alone in all this. He
can’t think it’s all on him while he still has others he can rely on, his captain somehow strong and
unwavering even when he himself still remains utterly heartbroken.

This is the only thing that knocks sense into him, and yet it disappoints Sanjius.
Because he knows it should have been him. These were similar sentiments passed to him by Zorin himself following Namilia’s death, and Sanjius should have said them. He should have been the one to comfort Zorin, despite his own compounding grief and sorrow.

He’d told Zorin to keep fighting before, told him that he himself was more than capable.

But he’s not showing it now, not stepping up for his knight when he should be.

They are all suffering, but when a strong man like Zorin, who never shows pain, starts to falter……this is the time Sanjius, as their prince, needs to be there.

None of this is getting easier. No. Never. But it’s starting to harden him….make him stronger.

Or perhaps just more and more numb.

Still, there is no lack of feeling when he steps up to Zorin two days after Chonrad’s death, while the rest of them tearfully retreat from the grave they’ve dug for him beneath a beautiful willow tree on a hill on the outskirts of Zoua, its leaves blooming with brilliant pink flowers that Chonrad would have loved. It’s a small consolation that they can leave him in such a peaceful place.

Zorin remains standing beneath that veil of blossoms, staring at the freshly covered dirt and the inscription Francus has carved directly into the trunk of the tree itself, an excerpt from a song Brokard used to sing---one Chonrad adored---about adventure and friendship and good brew….

Sanjius stands there too beside Zorin, sensing the heavy weight on the man’s shoulders, that he’s no longer trying to show quite as openly after what Luffient said.

But it’s there. Sanjius can sense it in his knight’s every breath…

“Zorin, walk with me…” he murmurs, and when he hears the careful shudder of the knight’s next exhale, he knows he’s going to obey, even if he hadn’t meant it as an order, for once.

“When you’re ready…” Sanjius says quietly, but it’s only another minute before Zorin clenches his jaw and turns away from the grave, starting ahead of Sanjius even though he doesn’t know where he’s going.

Sanjius comes up next to him though and nudges him to follow him towards town.

“Let’s go down by the river,” he says. “No one’s checked those buildings for supplies yet.”

Zorin says nothing, just trails after him.

Neither of them says anything after that, as a matter of fact, not for a long time as they look through debris, collapsed structures that were once homes, businesses, and yet now lay in dust and crumbles.

The town was once beautiful, it’s clear, nestled in the mountains amongst towering cliffs, dense trees and foliage growing from the cracks between buildings, some of which almost seem to lie sideways.

It’s even devoid of wildlife, and that is surprising because, as they walk, Sanjius starts to see hints that this was once a society that did indeed thrive on its connection to animals.

Faded frescoes on half-decimated walls depict herds of elephants, stone reliefs around the entrances of buildings showing cats, dogs, even rabbits. He soon sees, in the broken cobblestones that make up the streets, animal visages that decorate various stones here and there.
It’s a fascinating place, and he doesn’t understand what happened. Why it’s been left to rot.

He doesn’t even know if its former inhabitants still live. And the fact that this is their first glimpse of the land of Whole Cakia worries him greatly…

The two of them walk, finding not much of use save for a few discarded axes that Francus can perhaps modify, and some colorful flower bushes that Sanjius thinks will give them something to leave for Chonrad before they pick up their trek once more.

They can’t stop.

But oh, how he wishes they could, particularly when the abandoned street opens up to a small dock by the river, the river that is surprisingly clear, blue-green water rushing along saturated rocks of red and purple. Trees densely line the water on either side, branches dipping low as if to skim the water for fun.

And in the water are fish. Many fish, some darting past quickly, other larger ones lazily swishing about in place. All of them look edible.

It’s a beautiful sight, not only for its potential nourishment, but also for its tranquility, how untouched and pure it looks when so much around it is shrouded in darkness and pain.

Sanjius isn’t quite aware that he’s sat down on a large rock until he sees Zorin lower himself to it as well, taking his swords off his belt and holding them across his lap.

Zorin’s eyes are on him. He can feel it. But he doesn’t look over right away, only continues to admire the scenery.

Sanjius has always loved watching water, be it a river like this or the ocean. He misses it deeply, wishes he could return to simpler, safer times. Though he’s never before had a companion like this. And he finds himself remembering all the times he used to round Zorin up, past irritability blinding him to the fact that Zorin was almost always lazing about by the water too….

Suddenly, it seems more significant.

“He protected me.”

The prince looks over, his gaze immediately meeting Zorin’s, and though he’s initially confused, it soon becomes apparent what—or rather, who---his knight is talking about. The guilt and tortuous pain in his eyes is enough to give it away.

“We thought we heard something that night, so we ventured out to check,” Zorin continues with a quiet sigh. “We had heard something….Chonrad took the hit for me. I wasn’t fast enough…”

Sanjius’ heart clenches. He can hear the self-loathing in his voice, something that is a little surprising to him. Zorin has always been so closed, so skilled at hiding his emotions. As a knight, he has always been steadfast, always predictably stoic.

As a person, when pushed to the brink, it seems he is not.

And that is a shock, because Sanjius has never expected to find that person underneath.

“I’ve lost people in the past,” Zorin suddenly says, voice louder and more bitter, bringing Sanjius back to the moment and the sharp intensity that’s come to Zorin’s eyes.
The swordsman lets out a hiss between clenched teeth, shaking his head and looking away in frustration for a moment before turning back to the prince, almost with a vengeance.

“So why is this so damned difficult now?!”

The vulnerability in his voice is something that shocks Sanjius entirely. He’s battling with this, isn’t he, feelings of grief and despair, but it’s different. The anger in Zorin’s voice makes it sound like he’s angry with himself for even feeling such things.

But why shouldn’t he, considering just who they’ve lost? Even if the prince himself has tried to keep himself together for the sake of his remaining friends, he knows that it’s useless to freeze himself over entirely. He can distract himself, sure. But he knows the feelings are there and will come back.

It’s as if Zorin wishes to not feel at all….

“Why must you seem so disgusted with yourself?” Sanjius asks in reply, keeping his voice gentle but also forceful. “You paint this---this stony facade and when it ripples you act like it’s degrading you.”

He sees Zorin tense, and, in that moment, he desperately wants to know what the man is thinking. The prince has always been able to sit so readily with any of his friends and gain insight into their minds.

Usio wears his heart on his sleeve, as does Francus. Robisia, while more logical about her emotions and why she feels certain ways, is still open to discussion, and Luffient may be difficult to break through to, but it’s only because his energy is so manic he often doesn’t stay fixated on one emotion for too long. Even his gripping sadness can be melted somewhat by a good piece of meat and a hug. But Zorin….

Sanjius sighs, shaking his head a little, and his next question is more of a musing, something he hadn’t exactly intended on voicing aloud.

“Who did you lose that closed you off so...?”

He realizes it may have been a mistake when Zorin immediately shoots back, “That’s not your---”

“You don’t have to answer me,” Sanjius is quick to counter, though he can’t deny the twinge of disappointment he feels that Zorin wouldn’t answer him. “I’m just…”

It takes him a moment to settle on the right word before he decides, “Ashamed….. That I missed it all this time. I missed whatever was affecting you.”

It’s sentimental, but Sanjius can’t bring himself to care about that right now when their futures are becoming so uncertain.

Zorin’s eyes widen for a brief moment, before his brows draw in and he looks away, a hint of redness to his cheeks.

“There was nothing to miss,” he murmurs. “My past is my past.”

But Sanjius is relentless this time, unwilling to let him dodge.

“I know, but….you’ve dedicated yourself to me fully,” the prince continues, conviction rising in his voice. “And only now do you show any vulnera---”
“I told you I wouldn’t let you fall no matter what,” Zorin interrupts, as if he doesn’t even want to hear the possibility that he could have weakness, even though Sanjius has begun to realize, for himself included, that vulnerability does not necessarily equate. “This will not distract me if that’s what you—–”

“That’s not what I’m trying to say, if you’d just close your stubborn mouth for a moment!” Sanjius huffs, frustrated, and he turns to face Zorin fully on the rock, noting the way the swordsman’s eyes flick to him with a mixture of uncertainty and irritation.

“What I mean is…Zorin, this is not your fault. Nothing ever has been and—–” This next part is hard to say, not because he doesn’t mean it, but because he’s not used to saying things like this to Zorin of all people. “I think…I’ve ignored your human qualities for far too long. And for that I’m sorry.”

The shock that comes over the knight’s face in response is immeasurable, and it’s clear he hadn’t been expecting an apology from the prince in the slightest.

He doesn’t reply right away, even when he’d been so set on interrupting a moment ago.

And for the second notable time, Sanjius has the urge to reach out and comfort, as he would for any other of his friends, but the fact that it’s Zorin, the fact that his fingers tingle with the desire to touch his face, to slide back through his hair and---

“I….didn’t exactly make it easy,” Zorin mumbles, and for some reason, he’s moved his hand away from where it previously rested on the rock near the prince’s hip. He brings it to the hilt of one of his swords, trailing fingers over the design, almost to distract himself.

The thought runs through the prince’s mind that maybe he wouldn’t be so opposed to Zorin showing him a thing or two about swordsmanship now… If only so he can better protect his friends.

“I didn’t think….you’d ever see me anyway.” Zorin finishes.

Sanjius furrows his brow, surprised by Zorin’s words and unsure of what he means. It’s like the knight is remembering something Sanjius has no recollection of, just as he had back at Sharlille’s.

Maybe he should ask. In fact, he definitely should, but part of him is worried for what it could be that he’s forgetting….

Zorin lifts eyes to his again, and it’s the first time Sanjius has ever seen the usually confident swordsman look so shy.

He hasn’t quite processed that he must be looking the exact same way…

Just then, a high-pitched screech above them, and both Zorin and Sanjius jolt, heads jerking to the sky where they fully expect to see a wraith, despite not feeling the familiar dread that warns of their coming.

But then again, they’d both been a little preoccupied…

It’s not a wraith though, to their relief.

No, oddly, a bright red bird of prey comes into view, bursting forth from above the trees across the river and coming to land directly on the rock beside Sanjius.

The bird, hawkish in appearance, is nearly terrifying in its enormity, surely close to a meter in length, and it stares at the blond with golden eyes that offset its saturated feathers. This bird looks
It takes the prince a long minute to process the surprising sight, watching, wide-eyed, as the bird tilts its head expectantly.

And that’s when he finally notices the small scroll tied securely to its leg.

He lets out a breath, glances over at Zorin, who looks just as baffled, before carefully, slowly, reaching out to untie it.

Almost as soon as the paper is free, the bird unfurls its huge wings and takes off with a great gust of air, startling the prince back, scroll clutched to his chest until the bird is well out of pecking or scratching range.

Again, he meets Zorin’s eye automatically to see the swordsman’s brow has furrowed, and he silently jerks his head towards the paper in indication that Sanjius should read it.

Slowly, with his heart pounding in his chest, the prince obliges, unfurling the small page and letting eyes scan it…..only to quickly lower it to his lap a second later, shocked gaze right back on Zorin’s.

He lets out a breath of disbelief.

“Sir Shannik and the Red Knights have returned. They’re in the capital.”

When the conversation dialogue finally ended, and the screen cut back to the map, Sanji quickly closed his 3DS, his self-consciousness of earlier now practically screaming after that damn conversation.

It had nothing to do with them. The characters were talking about completely unrelated events---history that definitely hadn’t taken place in the real world, but there was something uncomfortably close to home about his own developing thoughts surrounding the mosshead. Things he wasn’t ready to talk about. Not yet.

“You saw it….” he muttered, for lack of anything better to say. “Happy, mosshead?”

Zoro could do nothing but nod silently.

He felt awkward too, essentially seeing how he’d acted and felt for so long when he was younger played out for him on the screen. And Sanji had accepted it---apologized even….

Did that mean…?

But no. It was a game. Even if it bore similarities to real life. Even if it could control real life. It wasn’t real life. And he had to remember that, before he allowed these feelings of exposure overwhelm him.

Sanji was getting to his feet, brushing off his shorts and slipping his 3DS back into his pocket.

For a moment, Zoro feared Sanji was going to ignore him now, shut down again, even though nothing had happened, other than the game, to provoke that.

But instead, the blond turned around and offered a hand down to him, trying to look casual when his face was bursting into flame.

Zoro stared at the hand for longer than he should have, but eventually he took it and stood as well.
Sanji let go as soon as he was up, the blond walking over to finally pick up the fallen skateboard, which he brought back and shoved into Zoro’s chest a little roughly. Then he turned to survey the high, steep wall beside them.

“Uhhh…” he muttered, quirking a brow. “How do we get out?”

To this, Zoro actually managed a snort, then wasted no time in tossing his skateboard up so it clattered onto the flat ground above the wall, freeing up his arms.

“Gotta run and jump,” was all he replied with.

And, a smirk on his lips, he did just that, backing up to the other end of the bowl. Then he sprinted as fast as he could, using the momentum to get partway up that opposite ramp before he kicked off and grabbed the lip of it, using his arms to pull himself up enough to swing a leg over and roll out.

A second later and a mossy head poked out, looking back down at Sanji with a challenging grin.

The cook growled, not about to lose out, even if it was far from a competition, so he did as Zoro had, backing up, then running towards the ramp.

With less practice, he didn’t make it as far as Zoro, and he knew he wasn’t going to be able to grab the lip…..if it weren’t for the hand that clamped down on his wrist and hauled him up, enough to give himself leverage to get out.

Had Zoro always been that damn strong?

Zoro could tell the blond didn’t exactly like being helped out by him twice in less than an hour, the asshole keeping his pride and not even thanking him this time.

But it didn’t matter, because he’d seen the tiniest smirk on Sanji’s lips that he quickly tried to hide with a scowl as he got up and started walking back towards his bike without further word.

Zoro didn’t hear his phone vibrate in his own pocket, too transfixed by that fleeting look on Sanji’s face that he dared to hope was endearment…

When they arrived home, consequences were immediate over Zoro’s apparent neglect for checking his texts.

As soon as he and Sanji entered the house, the blond heading for the kitchen and Zoro meandering into the living room, Luffy and Usopp practically tackled him onto the couch in frantic excitement.

Robin was out with Chopper now, accompanying him to his interview with Miss Kureha, and Franky had returned from dropping Nami at Vivi’s. Him and the two boys still at home had apparently settled down to watch some crazy wrestling match that was on TV, and for a second, Zoro thought this was the reasoning behind their rowdiness.

But then, a flurry of complaints, his face being smooshed into a throw pillow by Luffy, the boy’s knee digging into his spine when he collapsed his full weight onto Zoro.

“You didn’t answer my texts, Zoro! And neither did Sanji! We even texted him first!” Usopp yelped, trying to tug the pillow out from under him so he could fucking breathe.

“I didn’t---phone go off---dammit, Luffy! What the hell is this about!” Zoro gritted out, struggling to at least turn his head to the side.
He didn’t have to wait long for an answer though before Luffy let loose an ungodly screech in his ear that barely comprised an intelligible response.

“Shanks is back!” he exclaimed, bouncing on the couch and therefore crushing Zoro’s shoulders into the cushions repeatedly.

“Shanks?---Gagh!” Zoro responded in surprise, cut off entirely when Luffy’s arm slunk around his neck like a snake, gently crushing his esophagus when he cuddled into his friend’s back.

“Yeah,” Usopp supplied, having backed off, but still hovering close with a nostalgic smile on his face. “Hard to believe it’s been three years, huh?”

Franky chuckled from his armchair across the room.

“He’s gonna be super surprised to see how big all you little bros have gotten~” the man said, eventually standing and moving over to the couch so he could pry Luffy off Zoro. “Alright, kiddo, he’s turnin’ blue~”

A dramatic gasp for air from Zoro, who scrambled up to a sitting position as soon as Luffy was removed, rubbing at his throat and glaring at Usopp for no particular reason, causing the kid to cower.

“How long’s he staying for?”

Sanji’s voice as the blond entered the room, a tray full of drinks balanced on a hand, more than enough to distract Luffy as he zoomed over for juice.

“Dunno yet.” Franky replied, taking the bottle of cola Sanji offered him with a grin. “Haven’t even talked to him. Paulie saw him and his crew pullin’ into the docks near Galley-La. He’s probably wantin’ to surprise you kids, so ya might wanna pretend you didn’t hear.”

Zoro’s glare had slowly disappeared, seeing Usopp’s smile falter just a little, even as Luffy began to chatter happily about how good he was with secrets and pretending, Sanji immediately asserting he was the complete opposite.

Usopp’s reaction made sense. Shanks was important to all of them, having been their caretaker for three years after they’d all come to the house, even longer for Luffy. And when he’d left to start sailing again, they had all been upset.

But for Usopp, Shanks’ departure ran deeper.

He was the only one of them technically still on temporary foster care, despite it being years after the initial placement.

It was his father’s decision, following his mother’s death. Zoro didn’t know much, just that his father had taken to drinking in the aftermath, and they’d run out of money, lost their apartment. So, he made the decision to let Usopp go, for his son’s own well-being, while he job-hopped, eventually leaving with Shanks and his crew, and promises to come back for Usopp when the time was right.

The right time had yet to arrive.

But the look on Usopp’s face revealed that the boy held hope it now had. Usopp still loved and
admired his dad immensely, after all.

Zoro’s gaze flicked to Sanji, who’d just handed Usopp his drink and met the younger boy’s eye. Sanji had to know what Usopp was thinking too, because his smile was so gentle and so encouraging, especially when he gave a playful little raise of brows.

He didn’t have to say anything to draw a fully-excited grin onto Usopp’s face, immediately launching him into an animated conversation with Luffy over how they could all hide in the treehouse and then run out to charge Shanks like an army to surprise him when he inevitably came by the house.

They could have a barbecue and everything. And maybe Usopp’s dad could take them to paintball like that one time he had before he left with Shanks.

Sanji grinned and agreed, but his eyes had lifted to Zoro, only to find his friend already looking at him.

This time, Sanji didn’t look away, nor did he look sad or resigned, surely knowing what he must do.

No, he merely smirked at Zoro with confidence, gave a little nod.

And Zoro felt stupidly weak.

All because of Sanji and his damn smile.
Chopper’s smile was enough to light up the room in a way that hadn’t been seen since the boy was a little younger, a little more innocent. Certainly not since he’d been plagued by the bullies that insisted on making his life hell every day at school.

His eyes were bright, gestures flailing excitedly as he detailed to the dinner table all that had happened at his interview with Ms. Kureha earlier that day.

Maybe there was another empty spot beside Miss Robin, where Nami used to sit. Maybe they’d all been a little solemn, even Zoro, when Sanji laid out one less plate, spaced the place settings a little wider to accommodate for the extra room.

But none of them were about to squash Chopper’s mood.

His happiness was palpable enough that it was hard for Zoro to keep his eyes off him all throughout dinner, hard to keep a smirk from tugging at his lips and his hand from reaching out to ruffle the younger boy’s hair now and again, proudly. A few more days while they finalized the paperwork at the social services office, and Chopper would move out, to live with someone who understood and
appreciated his gifts, who would give him the chance to grow and learn at a more accommodating school.

Ms. Kureha still lived in Logue Town. So they could still visit….for as long as the rest of them were here anyway….

“She said she has model organs in her house! Like a real doctor’s office! I wonder if she has lollipops too!” the boy chattered excitedly.

“If you’re lucky, perhaps Ms. Kureha will let you perform dissections~” Robin mused.

“Did she have bugs? She totally had bugs in her house, right?” Luffy jabbered between shoveled mouthfuls of lasagna.

“Who the hell wants bugs in their house, idiot,” Sanji muttered beside him, whacking him over the head when he nearly swallowed his fork.

“Well, she might have bug collections, if that’s what you mean, Luffy,” Chopper replied.

Franky chuckled, taking a swig of his cola.

“A few days for the paperwork to be processed, but Ms. Kureha has already been approved for foster care,” she explained gently, reaching out to touch Usopp’s hand. “She’s invited Chopper to move in as soon as possible.”

This time, there was no gap of silence that followed. Instead, Luffy’s screech was immediate, the boy throwing up arms to exclaim, “That’s awesome, Chopper!” with full enthusiasm.

Luffy’s excitement broke the tension for Chopper at least, who giggled, though his eyes did linger on Usopp for a moment, a bit of worry shining there.

Usopp was still quiet, after all, staring steadfastly at his plate for a long minute. Until he pushed his chair back with an abrupt squeak along the wood floor, muttering, “May I be excused…?” to Robin, then adding, “I’ll finish later, Sanji, I’m just….not hungry right now….”
He didn’t wait for a reply before he’d gotten to his feet, pushed in his chair, and padded across the kitchen in his socks, those footsteps picking up speed the second he was out of sight in the hallway.

“Usopp…?" Chopper called after him, a little too late, and the boy brought a fearful gaze to the two adults, looking between Franky and Robin for guidance.

It was Sanji who pushed away from the table though, about to leave his Luffy-monitoring post to run after his friend.

But Zoro quickly beat him to it, muttering, “Is it okay?” to Franky, who nodded and murmured, “Sure thing, bro.”

That was all the permission he needed before he hurried up and started to stride from the room, his eyes finding Sanji’s as he did, then flicking them to Luffy and giving an understanding nod. Sanji should stay. Dinner was his thing, and only he could stop Luffy from eating all of it at once.

He caught the way Sanji’s gaze softened ever so slightly just before he turned the corner and left the room, his visage calm, but his heart in his throat as he trudged down the hall and up the stairs, the telltale sound of sniffles and sorrow growing louder once he’d reached the landing.

The door to the younger boys’ shared room was still ajar, and the lights were off, nothing but the dimming evening light to illuminate Usopp’s form on the bottom bunk, curled on his side in a ball facing the wall, sobs wracking his thin form.

It didn’t matter that the boy was fourteen years old and completely lost in tears. Zoro said nothing, thought no less of him. He simply entered the room silently, closed the door behind him and crossed to Usopp’s bed, taking a seat on the opposite end and scooting back to lean against the wall.

Usopp sensed his presence, must have known it was him, because his sniffles and whimpers paused, and there was an immediate effort to wipe at his face, hide away so Zoro couldn’t see the disgraceful effects.

“Don’t,” Zoro said, reaching out to plop a hand onto Usopp’s shin in comfort. He leaned his head against the wall, staring at the underside of Luffy’s bed above them. “Let it out.”

A choked sound left Usopp, and then the tears flowed anew, the boy clinging to a pillow and burying his face there as his body shook.

Zoro stayed there with him, looking at all the drawings scribbled on the wooden supports under Luffy’s mattress. Ballpoint pen doodles of heroes defeating monsters, silly, cartoony faces….even a few crude cave drawings that looked like the work of Luffy. A few cute animals from Chopper as well.

Zoro sighed and closed his eyes, which burned but didn’t leak. Still, he sat with Usopp until he calmed.

When Sanji quietly poked his head into the room after allowing, for once, Robin to clear the table and start the dishes, he found both Usopp and Zoro sitting on the lower bunk bed, shoulder to shoulder against the wall, their feet sticking out in a row over Usopp’s Big Hero 6 comforter.

He pulled his head back behind the door for a moment, unsure if he should enter on a potentially private moment.

“---and you’re---so close with him too,” Usopp was saying, voice a little thick, but otherwise steady.
“H-He loves you so much, and---I just don’t know how you’re so---I dunno, strong about everything, y’know….?”

“M’not....” Zoro replied with a sigh. “I feel the same as everyone else. Guess I just….more than anything, want him to be happy. And this is already making him so happy. Just gotta keep thinking about that....”

Zoro’s voice was so soft, and for some reason, Sanji closed his eyes, resting his forehead against the door. He closed his eyes, and he couldn’t stop himself. Before he knew it, he was imagining Zoro speaking to him in that tone, comforting him, and though he already had in many ways, it had never been with the gentleness that he bestowed upon the younger boys.

“I try to, but....” Usopp started, and Sanji heard a shuffling on the bed, blankets shifting. “We were all together. We all had each other, but now....so much is changing, and---and now it’s never gonna be like this again! We’re never gonna---”

“Did you want everyone to be stuck here forever?” Zoro cut in quietly, and Sanji felt his heart clench a little. This was his doing, after all. He’d been the one to change things with the game....

He didn’t regret it, but....he couldn’t deny that Usopp was voicing a lot of his same sentiments, particularly when Usopp replied.

“No...” he said, a little miserably. “But....we finally had a real family here....I guess that’s what’s bumming me out the most....”

Sanji heard Zoro sigh.

“We’re always gonna be family, Usopp. No matter where we go,” he murmured, something that sent a pang right through Sanji’s chest, a twist that was both painful and warming at the same time, breath shuddering out of him as quietly as he could manage.

It was quiet again, and Sanji couldn’t discern what was going on inside the room, but he knew what was going on inside his head.

Usopp was next. He had to be. Usopp, despite what he said now, had always wanted to return to his father, and maybe it hadn’t worked out for him yet, but now it could. And there was no doubt he needed that hope. He didn’t want Usopp to feel like he was losing anything or anyone. He wanted him to feel that same fulfillment and happiness as Chopper now did, that feeling of being wanted outside the walls of their home.

“I’m glad...you and Sanji are friends now at least.”

Usopp’s voice again, and the blond froze.

“It’s....it’s nice, like....everything’s finally the way it should be....”

Sanji’s hand clenched around the doorknob where it still rested, his face heating and eyes widening, fixated on the tape holding up the flimsy paper sign the boys had made to adorn the entrance to their bedroom “headquarters.”

What would Zoro say without Sanji in the room? Would he deny it? Deny everything that had changed over the past few weeks? Insult him....?

Sanji felt an irrational, defensive anger beginning to rise within him because he wouldn’t be able to stand it. He wouldn’t be able to stand it if Zoro didn’t own up to the changes in front of everyone
else. He wouldn’t be able to stand it if the other teen hadn’t been sincere.

What he heard was a snicker, and not a mean one, from Zoro in the room.

“You know he’s listening in the hallway, right?”

Sanji’s eyes shot up, his palm, clammy now, nearly sliding off the doorknob.

“Huh?! He is?” Usopp asked.

“What, did you seriously not see the door open? Curly, get your ass in here.”

The door flung itself wider, and in marched the blond, his fiery look of annoyance instantly bringing a grin to Zoro’s face.

Sanji paused, glanced around at the darkening room, and flipped on the lights, glaring at Zoro for seemingly no reason at all.

It was amusing though, particularly when Zoro patted the bed beside him, making sure to broaden his grin pleasantly, and Sanji balked, face paling, but then turning an intriguing shade of red.

“Hey, Sanji…” Usopp mumbled, seemingly oblivious to the exchange between the other two, legs now crossed on the bed, the boy rocking a little insecurely and picking at the blankets. “Me and Zoro were just talking…”

Zoro patted the bed more insistently for Sanji to join them, waiting to see if the blond would take the invitation, though he had a feeling he would. Sanji was never able to resist helping his friends. It was why he’d gotten up here so quickly after dinner. Before Luffy and Chopper even.

No surprise that he crossed the room and perched himself on the edge, shooting a look at Zoro before focusing his attention on Usopp.

“You okay?” he asked quietly, lips turning up a little to attempt a comforting smile.

Usopp nodded, thankfully, even managing a small one himself. Zoro still had no idea how Sanji had that effect on people….he could seriously draw out smiles almost as well as Luffy.

“You know we can still see him on weekends,” Sanji murmured to his friend, in that comforting voice. “I’m sure Miss Robin will get his address and we can bike over whenever we want.”

He flicked eyes to Zoro then, irritation gone, replaced with a softer knowing look that ensured Zoro’s gaze didn’t leave his, not when his blue eyes were so hypnotically kind.

“Besides, you never know.” Sanji continued, still looking at Zoro for a long moment before he finally focused on Usopp again. “Better things could totally happen. I mean….Shanks is in town, right? And that means, so is—-”

“I don’t wanna get my hopes up,” Usopp insisted, shaking his head and holding up hands. “I know my dad’s here, but—he might not be ready to take me back yet! You guys are right. I should just be happy for Chopper and all that! I am!”

Sanji merely shrugged and grinned a little wider, leaning back on his palm, fingers nearly brushing Zoro’s jeans.

“I dunno though. Maybe it’s good to get your hopes up,” he suggested. “After all, think of all the good stuff that’s been happening lately. Brook, Nami, now Chopper? Nothing wrong with a little
hope~”

Usopp was quiet, and he glanced at Zoro, almost as if for permission to do so.

Zoro merely smirked and gave him a teasing elbow to the side, which only grew a relieved look on Usopp’s face.

“You’re right! Maybe he is here for me! He promised me he would be some day and I gotta believe that he will!” he exclaimed, slamming hands down onto the mattress resolutely.

“Damn straight,” Sanji encouraged, repeating Usopp’s gesture with his own hands to hype him up more. “And you know what else is great? Dessert crepes. But I gotta make ‘em fresh, and you gotta be in the kitchen to get one before Luffy, so are you in?”

“Damn straight!” Usopp mimicked with a pumped fist, just before he fell forward on the bed to envelop both Sanji and Zoro in a tight hug.

“You guys are the best…I mean it,” Usopp said, nuzzling into Sanji’s shoulder, the blond laughing and lifting a hand to squeeze his friend back.

Zoro grunted, a little surprised, but tolerated the hug too, even lifted a hand to pat Usopp’s back.

He was mainly aware of Sanji’s shoulder pressing against his, heat spreading from the point of contact, all the way down his arm.

Usopp released them a second later, and scrambled off the bed, hiking up his shorts a little and nearly tripping on Luffy’s discarded school backpack before heading to the door, mood completely flipped.

“I’ll go make sure Luffy hasn’t gotten his fingers into anything!” he chirped, making no comment about the fact that neither Zoro nor Sanji had moved from the bed just yet.

And then he was gone, the door practically vibrating in his wake, his footsteps pounding down the stairs.

Zoro watched the back of Sanji’s head, the young cook still looking out at the hallway beyond, and Zoro was acutely aware of the urge to reach out and smooth down the blond strands that stuck up, ruffled by Usopp’s hug.

Sanji beat him to it though, his hand lifting to finger-comb his hair back into order before he turned and lifted narrowed eyes to Zoro’s again.

Zoro sat there, waiting to see if Sanji would say anything, but he didn’t, just glared even more until he was nearly squinting and Zoro had to laugh.

“What’s your problem?” asked the mosshead, his smile turning a little stupid because somehow that dumb glower on Sanji’s face managed to look….yeah, attractive, shadows accentuating his sharp nose, and Zoro didn’t even question it this time. He just thought about how, even though Sanji was seated a foot or so away, a tangible warmth seemed to cloud the air between them.

Maybe that was just his imagination though.

“You didn’t reply to Usopp!” Sanji squawked, probably the last thing Zoro had expected him to be pissed about. “He said he was happy we were friends now, and you didn’t say shit! You just called *me* in!”
A chuckle burst its way past Zoro’s lips.

“So?” he shot back. “It wasn’t a question! What did you want me to say?”

“Tell him you agreed or something, idiot! Or—or—”

The blond seemed to realize the ‘mistake’ behind his words because his face immediately burst into flames and he cut himself short, especially when Zoro’s eyebrows shot up.

“You---” Zoro stuttered, something strange and light brewing in his chest. “You actually—wanted me to get all sappy with him?”

“I---I don’t know, stupid!” he shot back immediately, sounding just as flustered as Zoro, and, though it might have been Zoro’s imagination, a suspicious redness began to tinge his cheeks. “I just---don’t wanna feel like—”

Zoro ducked his head when Sanji looked away, his hand reaching out of its own accord to palm the bed near Sanji’s hip, trying to catch a glimpse of the blond’s eyes.

“Like what…?” he pressed.

“Like—” Sanji started, but then seemed to think better of it, shaking his head adamantly.

“Nothing…”

“Like what?!” Zoro asked again, raising his voice.

“Like nothing!”

“Tell me!”

“No!”

“Why not?!”

Sanji growled with frustration, and Zoro stared hard at his profile, his eyes lingering on the way his hair brushed his nose, down to Sanji’s lips, which he’d drawn into a straight line of irritation.

He couldn’t look away from his face, and it was quiet, the forceful breaths leaving Sanji’s nose eventually starting to calm before a final, resolute one.

“Because I don’t wanna feel like I’m the only one who likes how things are now, dammit!” he finally admitted, rounding on Zoro and glaring, daring the other teen to make fun of him.

Zoro felt his heart and his stomach do a simultaneous flip, his lips parting in a look of shock he hadn’t intended, but when Sanji was sitting there with such a serious and fierce declaration, one he hadn’t ever expected to leave the cook’s lips, it was difficult to keep his composure.

It took a good few seconds before he could even manage a reply.

“You seriously think—” he stammered. “Do you think I don’t like it?”

“I---no,” the blond huffed right back, and for just a fraction of a second, there was worry there. Worry and fear of judgment. But when no such judgment came, he shook his head. “I just---urgh, I have crepes to make, can we do this later?!”

No. They couldn’t. Zoro didn’t want to. He wanted this moment to keep going. He wanted,
suddenly, for Sanji to tell him more. Tell him all his feelings, and he’d fucking listen because what if Sanji was starting to feel the same stupid things.

Maybe it was wishful thinking, that maybe he wasn’t the only one whose skin tingled whenever they touched. Maybe he wasn’t the only one who had trouble breathing as soon as he smiled. Maybe he wasn’t the only one who was scared out of his mind and had no idea what to do, had no idea how to even channel what he was feeling because anything more than what they had now was completely beyond him.

“You’re just saying that to dodge! Like hell you’ll bring it up again!” he blurted out fearfully, because there was fear now. He hated talking about feelings, but the thought of Sanji sharing any of his was something that he was willing to hear.

But Sanji was getting up, leaving him there on the bed as he started to cross the room to the door, and it was Zoro’s lingering panic that maybe he’d said something wrong, that he’d left the cook to feel alone in all this, that had him hastily saying, “I like it, Curly. I like how things are.”

He found a different phrase desperately wanted to leave his mouth, but it didn’t, particularly when Sanji stopped just short of the doorway.

He didn’t turn around, and Zoro’s heart sped up in anticipation of how he’d react.

But when Sanji finally looked back over his shoulder, there was a smirk there that barely concealed a brighter smile. Honestly, the guy really was bad at concealing how he felt.

“I made rice pudding too,” Sanji said, and, as always when the cook remembered what kinds of foods he liked, Zoro’s jaw dropped a little, mouth practically watering in anticipation. Maybe it had been a few weeks, but he still wasn’t quite used to being on the receiving end of Sanji’s kindness.

“Weirdo....” Sanji muttered with a roll of eyes, most likely in response to the dumb look on Zoro’s face, and he made to turn towards the door again, but he paused, his expression sombering some when he glanced back at Zoro again.

“Also….after dessert....” he said quietly. “Usopp’s next....”

Of course, Zoro knew this. He’d known it the second Usopp ran from the table at dinner. Hell, probably before that even. The moment Sanji’s gaze met his earlier that afternoon, learning that Shanks was in town, along with Usopp’s dad....he’d known.

It hurt, just a little, to think about.

But still, his reply was certain.

“Yeah. Definitely....”

Sanji was glad, glad to see Usopp smiling again, engaging with Chopper and Luffy, the three of them once again at the kitchen table, absolutely mutilating their crepes by making snowflakes out of them with their teeth.

It was irritating and insulting to his cooking. But neither that nor his relief over Usopp’s improved mood were enough to distract him from the stupid mosshead seated at the counter, shoveling rice pudding down his throat at alarming speed.

It wasn’t enough to distract him from the fact that Zoro said he liked it. Zoro liked how things were
between them. He’d actually admitted to it, and considering how bad Sanji knew Zoro to be at lying, it was pretty obvious he’d been sincere.

Never in a million years had he expected it though. Maybe he should have started to, given how things had changed, but dammit, when the very thought was enough to make his insides turn to mush, it was something he didn’t much want to acknowledge.

Because it was Zoro. Sanji could open up to most anyone in the house without trouble, but Zoro? Zoro? Who thought all emotion was stupid? Who grew annoyed at the mere mention of feelings?

Why was he suddenly so unashamed to express them? Had he missed something…?

He’d leaned against the counter across from Zoro without fully realizing it, watching the idiot eat, as animalistic as ever. And he, thus, noticed when Zoro’s eyes drifted up to his, though they quickly widened and looked back down the second their eyes met.

He saw the way Zoro’s ears tinged a curious shade of red, and he felt the way just that mere sight brought a pleasant tingle to his chest, the feeling of triumph surely, though he wasn’t exactly sure what he’d triumphed over.

He tried not to think about it too much though, just grabbed a napkin from the holder at the edge of the counter and slid it over to the sloppy green-haired pig, who currently had pudding on his chin like a damn toddler.

Zoro noticed, his brow furrowing. Then he quickly attempted a scowl, though he reached his hand out to take the paper square.

That was when the doorbell rang suddenly, the two of them startling enough that their fingers brushed and froze there, even as the excited chaos ensued in the kitchen behind them.

“I’ll get it!” Luffy screeched at ungodly volume, chair scraping loudly along the floor as he pushed back from the table and sprinted to the door as if whoever it was would leave if he didn’t answer in the next three seconds.

Sanji pulled away first, embarrassed, under a gaze of Zoro’s that was almost….if he could even associate this word with Zoro….shy.

He didn’t have much time though, to dwell on how endearing it might have been before another deafening squawk from Luffy nearly ripped open the heavens.

“SHANKS!!!!” his voice cried from down the hall, and this was enough to snap everyone’s gazes towards the front door, even if Sanji still felt Zoro’s on him for a moment longer…

Not a half hour later, there was yet more dessert being enjoyed out on the back patio around Franky’s fire ring, melted chocolate and marshmallows all over the younger boys’ faces and grins on everyone’s, old rock tunes playing from the speakers Franky had hid strategically in the surrounding bushes.

Shanks was seated beside Franky, the four adults in a circle of cushioned patio chairs around the fire, including, much to no one’s surprise, Usopp’s dad. He’d always visited when he could, been playful and humored the kids, but tonight he was quiet, more quiet than they remembered him to be, sitting beside his captain with a beer in hand and a small smile on his lips.

Still, Shanks’ energy was enough to make up for it, clearly thrilled to have Luffy, Chopper, and
Usopp hanging off him like a pack of monkeys, despite the boys being far too big for that now.

“Dammit, you guys, last time I saw you, all three of you could’ve fit in my pocket!” he laughed, cheeks rosy from the warmth of the fire, and his grin bright. “Now you’re practically startin’ college!”

“Chopper’s going to college!” Luffy chattered, poking at their former guardian’s left arm, concealed by his white button-down. “Robin said!”

“No, I’m not, Luffy!” Chopper interjected, giggling.

“I said Ms. Kureha may enroll him in a specialized school, Luffy,” Robin corrected gently from behind her glass of wine, sharing a fondly exasperated look with Franky when the boy hardly seemed to process her answer.

“Oh,” was all Luffy said before changing subjects entirely. “Shanks, show us your arm!”

“Oh yeah, I upgraded since I last saw you kids!” Shanks exclaimed, already shrugging Luffy off a little to roll up his sleeve over his prosthetic, result of a run-in with a sea monster, he always said. None of them knew the real story, but most were pretty certain Luffy did.

“Zoro, get over here,” Shanks called with a broad grin. “You’re gonna like this! I can move it----with my mind!”

A mysterious wiggle of silicon fingers, and he already had Luffy and Chopper completely intrigued, as well as Franky, who scooted his chair closer to try and get a look at the hardware.

Zoro stepped closer too, though his attention was mostly focused on Usopp, who seemed to be acutely aware of his father’s presence, the boy trying desperately to make his glances and hopeful looks seem subtle, even as he feigned his usual level of enthusiasm.

He and his dad had hugged, but it had been a little unsure, a little restrained, and Zoro had to wonder why Yasopp was being so reserved when he’d never had a problem being loud and boisterous before.

There must have been a reason though, because, while Shanks demonstrated the rotational capabilities of his robotic wrist, Yasopp extended an arm to knock his son on the shoulder lightly from where he sat.

Usopp jumped, startled by the touch, and turned to look at his dad, who was smiling gently, wavy blond hair falling over dark skin from over the bandana tied around his forehead. It was why Usopp often wore one, to mimic his father.

Yasopp rubbed a hand over his scruffy jaw, then set his beer bottle on the ground and planted hands on his knees, getting to his feet.

Usopp watched him straighten, eyes widening a bit when Yasopp said, “Let’s go for a walk, eh, kid?”

His dad was the only person known to completely quiet the boy, for the simple reason that Usopp looked up to him so much. Usopp stopped his fanciful bragging, stopped his exaggerated stories, if only for want to hear his father’s own true ones of his exciting life on Shanks’ crew.

It was why the boy nodded so readily, fell easily into his father’s side when the man threw an arm around his shoulders and gave a nod to Robin, who smiled softly and watched them head off across
the yard. They rounded the corner of the house, most likely to walk down to the beach, and then they were gone.

Robin wasn’t the only one who noticed the two take their leave.

Zoro’s attention drifted from Shanks to the pair, staring off at the darkening yard, the shapes of the trees now silhouetted against an orange sky.

He felt a touch on his arm, and he realized Sanji had come outside too, setting out drinks for everyone. But now the blond had his hand on Zoro’s forearm, and when Zoro looked up, all he saw was Sanji’s features in the soft glow of the firelight. He jerked his head towards the house and Zoro knew exactly what he was implying.

The mosshead followed him, without a word to the others, back inside, all the way up to their room, where they shut the door and both automatically settled onto Sanji’s bed.

Sanji pulled his 3DS out of his pocket, still in there from earlier, and for some reason, Zoro felt immensely good when Sanji looked at him, as if to ask, silently, if he was ready.

Zoro gave a nod, shifted closer, daring to brush shoulders with the other teen, feeling the warmth of Sanji’s arm against his.

The blond didn’t stop him.

“The letter is authentic. I cannot detect any trace of manipulative magic, and this certainly seems like a message Sir Shannik would send,” Robisia says, her slender fingers trailing lightly over the smooth parchment one more time, glowing ever so slightly over some of the text to confirm its origins as mere ink.

On the parchment a short statement is scrawled in jagged handwriting, one far more simple than its grand method of delivery.

‘We’ve returned,’ it reads. ‘Stay your course. We will secure the capital.’

“So it’s true…” Sanjius breathes, and though it should be a cause for relief, he’s not sure why a strange sense of foreboding still hangs over him.

He knows Zorin feels it too, because the swordsman stands beside him, brow furrowed and gaze downcast as he studies the ground.

They’d returned to camp to deliver the news, but it’s hardly been met with the enthusiasm it perhaps should have been.

Sir Shannik trained Luffient and Chonrad before they were knighted, and Usio’s father continues to serve in Sir Shannik’s force of Red Knights. The news should have brought joy, but even Luffient only manages a fraction of his usual excitement, and Sanjius knows the loss of Chonrad is still weighing heavy on each of them.

Robisia quietly suggests they get ready to move onward, now that they’ve gathered some tools from the rubble of Zoua and taken proper care of Chonrad’s burial. Francus mutters something about preparing the horses, and he and Robisia share a silent but pained look as he moves past her.

Luffient looks to Usio for a moment, his gaze uncharacteristically serious and thoughtful as he murmurs, “Come fill the water jugs with me.”
But Usio doesn’t accept, entirely odd for him because, while Luffient’s words are not an order, it’s a rare time indeed that Usio denies an opportunity to spend time with the other knight.

“I should ready my slingshot,” is all he says, eyes downcast as if looking at Luffient will trigger some emotion within him that he doesn’t want to dredge up. “Perhaps I’ll join you in a bit.”

Then he takes his leave, striding off towards the grassy hill nearby….and not to his small arsenal of weapons propped against his pack of belongings near the spent fire circle.

Luffient watches him go, with that expression that Sanjius is beginning to see more and more these days. The boy seems older, features more hardened in the past few weeks alone than his nineteen years have given him until now.

Sanjius has always known Luffient to be strong. But the look on his face, despite its steely exterior, also seems terribly breakable, and why shouldn’t it be? He’s lost three people he cared about, including one of his best friends. And now another is pulling away, and he’s powerless to stop it.

This is why Sanjius decides to follow Usio, who shouldn’t isolate himself. He needs to know he’s not alone.

But just as he moves, he sees a flash of green, and it’s Zorin moving swiftly after Usio, touching a hand to Luffient’s shoulder as he goes.

He does that, and it’s like he’s lifted a burden, Luffient’s chest sinking as he lets out a breath, and the beginnings of a tiny smile start to quirk at his lips again. Then he’s turning to Sanjius and demanding food before they start to move, and Sanjius knows Zorin will fix things. Or at least hold them together until they need mending again.

He’s content to leave things in Zorin’s hands, and focus his own on preparing a meal.

That doesn’t stop his curiosity from prodding him, as a half hour passes, and he can still see the small glimpse of Usio and Zorin seated in the grass up on the hill, half concealed by both the smoke of the dying fire and the tree trunk they lean against.

They need to eat, Robisia, Francus, and Luffient having nearly finished their bowls of rabbit stew (one more vigorously than the others).

Robisia murmurs they should put out the fire, lest they give away their location, Luffient begins to chastise her on the importance of such a tradition, and Sanjius decides it’s as good a time as any to steal away and fetch the other two.

He pushes up from his crouch over the fire and makes his way across the camp, the ground tilting to a low-angled slope as he walks, boots passing over trampled dirt and into the taller grass that tickles his calves.

He is quiet as he approaches, even taking a moment halfway up the hill to pause and really take in where he is, so far from the home he’s always known.

The ocean is nowhere in sight, and he misses it. He misses the sound, the smell, and while the sea of green that occupies the clearing and the sprinkling of saturated wildflowers mimic the ocean’s movement and sparkle, it’s not the same. Although the fresh smell of nature promises hope and regrowth, even amidst the ruins of Zoua that stretch out beyond their camp, Sanjius worries he won’t have a home to return to.
He worries that, despite his own convictions, what he’s been doing is running, under the guise of searching for help.

Are the others wrong? Should he have stayed in Baratia, in spite of the danger? Should he have stayed and fought for them, as Sir Shannik is now…?

His mind drifts to his conversation with Zorin, down by the river. How adamantly Zorin had vowed to protect him. To stay by his side… He remembers what Zorin said a few days ago, that he wouldn’t be able to handle losing him.

He remembers how inexplicably good those words made him feel, and he remembers how much he wanted Zorin to open up to him, his disappointment when Zorin remained quiet.

He wants a future for his knight. He doesn’t want to be the reason behind Zorin’s demise. Behind any of his friends’ demises, but… surely not someone as strong as Zorin.

Perhaps he didn’t force any of them to come with him. But he still wonders just how differently things would have gone had he stayed in the capital….

Sanjius closes his eyes, just for a moment, picturing the churning white foam of the ocean, allowing it to calm him before he continues ascending the hill, approaching Usio and Zorin from behind.

He can hear Usio speaking quietly, and he pauses a short distance below them, particularly when he hears that tremble in his friend’s voice that only confirms his guilt and uncertainty of moments earlier.

“I don’t know if I can keep doing this, Zorin…” he is saying, fingers stealing back through his curly hair, and Sanjius stops, his heart clenching in his chest. “I….Of course I want to support the Prince, but….what happens? In the end? Do we just lose everyone? Who says anyone in Whole Cakia will even help us?”

Usio is quiet for a moment, his sigh mingling with the soft whistle of the breeze.

“Things are already never going to be the same, and it feels---like what we’re doing is only going to result in more casualties…and I can’t help feeling as if…”

Again, he trails off, and though Sanjius can’t see Zorin from his vantage point, the tree trunk obscuring him, he hears the swordsman’s voice murmur, “As if…?” to prompt him.

He doesn’t necessarily need to though, because Sanjius predicts what he’ll say, as much as it terrifies him.

Thus, it’s not surprising when Usio whispers fearfully, “…As if I’m next…”

Zorin is silent, and any conviction Sanjius had climbing up that hill disappears.

He should be rushing up there to reassure him, tell him it’s not true, but the horrible thought that passes through the prince’s mind is that Usio is right. He has the same hunch, and it’s made worse when Usio expands on his point a second later.

“It’s no secret I’m the weakest one,” he mutters in defeat. “I-I don’t---I’m skilled at long range, but everything we’ve faced is---”

It’s Zorin who cuts in, saying what Sanjius can’t.
“That’s not going to happen,” the knight insists. “We’re going to protect you just as fiercely as we protect the Prince---”

“But it wasn’t enough for Namilia!” Usio shoots back. “Or for Chonrad---!”

He seems to stop himself though, and the prince can see the slump of Usio’s shoulders when he witnesses Zorin’s expression, which Sanjius can infer is equal parts surly and broken.

“I’m sorry….that’s not…” Usio murmurs eventually, partnered with another sigh. “I know you did your best…”

Sanjius realizes he’s lowered himself to the grass, that he’s now sitting there on the hillside with his back to Zorin and Usio, a dull stare fixed on the camp below, studying the cragged ruins which mark the foreboding entrance to Whole Cakia.

Maybe that will be his kingdom before long. His own beautiful castle crumbled, the towers collapsed, doors broken, golden filigree clouded and tarnished beyond repair, lost to the elements. Perhaps the ocean will claim it somehow, rise up above the cliffs and seize it in its waves.

Have his other friends lost faith too? Has Zorin’s loyalty concealed his inner doubt…?

The thought alone hurts him, twists in his chest like a claw, thinking of how, just a few short weeks ago, he would have never assumed otherwise. Zorin’s dislike for him had been palpable.

Maybe all that had changed between them had been his own imagination….his own desire for something better...

“No. You’re right,” he hears Zorin say, his voice a smooth rumble. “I failed them, especially Chonrad.”

Of course Zorin would blame himself. Even though Sanjius has advised him not to, even though he told him to rely on him as well… Sanjius almost starts to resent him again.

“But if we give up, what did they die for?” he continues, with more conviction. “I believe in the Prince. I believe he is the best leader we can have. He can fight for us. He can hold onto the kingdom no matter what happens, so I’m willing to put my life on the line for him. For all of this....”

Sanjius’ heart stutters in his chest, his head lifting and turning to look over his shoulder, at the tree that hides Zorin from view.

His breaths come lightly, a feeling glowing within him like the warmth of a hearth, banishing his apprehension.

Suddenly, there is the urge to reveal himself, to stand and march right up there to---do what? He has no idea, but the image that flashes through his mind is that of himself pushing Zorin up against the tree, but certainly not with malicious intent, and the sudden flash is enough to jolt his heart again, send it thumping hard in his chest.

“What…?” Zorin’s voice sounds again, quiet, and a little suspicious, as if he’s seen into the prince’s mind, wondered why he’s hastily pushing strange thoughts from his head.

But it’s Usio who replies, a hint of a smile in his voice.

“Nothing….it’s just---”
A thunderous crack, like a thick block of ice breaking apart, suddenly resounds in the air, emanating from the very sky and echoing throughout the valley.

Immediately, Sanjius looks up in alarm, already scrambling to his feet in anticipation of a fight.

But what he sees isn’t the usual swarm of wraiths billowing towards them, their bony limbs dripping with rotted flesh, outstretched to kill.

Instead, the landscape before him is just as it was, but it ripples, just like a reflection in water, ripples and seems to crawl with strange square forms that tile across his vision, briefly distorting his surroundings.

Another startling crack, and it happens again. The rippling is all around him, to dizzying effect, and he’s glad for the solid hand he feels curling around his arm with urgency.

It’s Zorin’s hand, the others having flocked to surround him as well, but it’s Zorin’s gaze he meets and holds when the ground itself gives an ominous quake.

Usio screeches in alarm, and the six of them huddle closer, yet more ripples ravaging their vision for but a moment.

Until, from beyond the ruins of Zoua, a creeping blackness begins to form, bubbling into existence from the very fabric of the air, a thick, viscous black that overtakes the buildings, crawls down the streets and then unexpectedly stretches up to blot out the sky above, swallowing everything in its path.

Trees and age-old structures disappear, and the horses whinny in panic, hardly following any orders when they begin to stampede away from the encroaching darkness, the shrill cawing of birds overhead as they flee as well.

Sanjius realizes, with horror, that it’s not merely a wall. It’s everything. The blackness is their world, and the only thing that brings him back to it is the sharp tug on his arm.

“Go! Run!” Zorin is yelling, Luffient giving his back a hard shove as well to get him going.

There’s nothing else they can do to escape it, nothing they can do to fight it, and with his heart in his throat, and a suffocating dread in his chest, stealing the air from his lungs, Sanjius has no choice but to scramble up the hill with the others, abandoning their camp, abandoning the food, most of their weapons.

They manage to crest the hill, limbs quivering and breaths panting harshly, but there’s little time to stop as the darkness won’t.

A voice in his ear, and he can swear Zorin’s lips brush his skin as he urges, “Come on---come on,” presses his hand on the small of his back to keep him moving.

They crest the hill, unveiling the stretch of untamed forest before them that stands as their only salvation, though even the trees’ protective canopy will surely not hinder whatever is behind them. The world itself no longer seems stable.

They sprint anew, trampling flowers, the rumble of the horse’s hooves growing more and more distant as they gallop into the woods ahead, reins and stirrups loose and flying.

Sanjius hears the whimper laced between Usio’s huffs, the faltering of Robisia’s steps as her foot catches in a ditch.
He sees her start to fall out of the corner of his eye, and in that split second he turns to look at her, the darkness is upon them, directly behind them, stretching its massive wings to finally pull them in---

Francus catches Robisia, pushes her hard towards the others, just when the darkness licks at her ankles.

He slows for but an instant, but that instant is enough.

Sanjius’ last image of Francus is of that black mass latching onto him and creeping over his form like a heavy cloak, sucking him into its depths like quicksand.

Luffient whips around in alarm, and Usio lets out a despairing cry.

“Francus!” Sanjius hears Robisia scream, or is that him screaming?

He’s no longer sure what he’s conscious of in that moment, save for his outstretched hand, desperately reaching for his disappearing friend.

His vision tiles with those strange squares again, squares that are now turning black as well, checkering over the last of Francus as the final glimpse of his flesh vanishes into the mass.

Zorin’s pulling him back against his chest.

He thinks he feels his knight’s lips, in his hair this time.

Just before everything goes black.

“Plug in the power cord, dammit!”

“It’s not the power---I told you! It’s like the game is---urghhh, shit!”

It was no use. Sanji could do nothing but mash buttons uncontrollably as the screen slowly swept to black, swallowing up both the playing field and his characters, despite his desperate attempt to move them.

Both screens disappeared, the music freezing as well, stuttering like a broken record before it too cut out entirely, leaving the only sound that of Sanji’s heavy breaths and frustrated growl when he slammed the 3DS down onto his mattress, its power light still blazing strong.

He stared hard at the screen, willing it to come to life again, his heart beating rapidly and the feeling that he’d just lost everything ripping through his chest like a knife.

He wasn’t fully aware he’d reached out to grab Zoro’s wrist in his panic, the other teen hovering close as well, watching the screen.

Zoro, however, was hyper aware, aware of nothing but Sanji’s warm fingers, aware of his own pounding pulse that was probably tangible to Sanji’s touch.

They were frozen like that, for a long moment. Waiting.

But then, almost miraculously, the game came back, displaying the familiar map screen, Sanji’s little avatar bouncing energetically over… the kingdom of Baratia… their starting point.

And the rest of the points on the map had vanished entirely.
Zoro felt Sanji’s grip on his wrist tighten, heard his sharp intake of breath before he moved, quickly releasing him so he could pick up the 3DS again and rush through to the characters screen.

His hands were shaking….and the moment he saw five characters on the screen, his same roster minus Franky, Sanji dropped the device to the bed once more and buried his face in his hands.

“F-Fuck,” he stuttered out, breaths coming more quickly than they should, given they were just sitting there.

He’d panicked, and Zoro had to admit he’d felt a twinge of it himself. They could have lost everything, could have been separated, in real life, all in one go.

Or perhaps worse….something could have gone wrong….and the good fortune of their friends could have been reversed.

Zoro’s eyes moved from the game screen, where Usopp’s character still posed bravely with fists on his hips, to Sanji’s face again, and he found himself lifting hands to Sanji’s, pulling them down gently and ducking his head in an attempt to catch his eye.

“It’s okay,” he murmured, eliciting another shuddery exhale from the blond, who hadn’t yet torn eyes from his game.

Zoro’s roved over his tense features, and he wondered how close Sanji would allow him to get, if he noticed Zoro hadn’t let go of his hands yet.

He sat there quietly, waiting for Sanji’s breathing to calm, waiting for those blue eyes to finally find his, to look at him and see that he wasn’t gone. That he’d always been right there in front of him.

“Why did you move Franky….?” Zoro asked quietly when Sanji finally rose eyes to his. His face was close, and it was hard, suddenly, not to look at his lips. He shook his head and added, “What about Usopp…?”

“I didn’t move him!” Sanji replied, nearly whining. “It just—you saw! I played you and Usopp’s conversation, then the whole thing just---”

“Glitched...bugged or some shit….” Zoro finished, remembering all too well the familiar stuttering and pixelation before the game wiped itself away.

“You think…?” Sanji mumbled, an attempt at snark that only came out rather miserably. “And now the fucking map’s gone.”

Zoro sighed when Sanji looked away from him again, instead focusing on the blond’s fingers beneath his, how he wasn’t pulling away. Did he even notice the stupid flush on Zoro’s cheeks? Couldn’t he feel the heat coming off him in waves?

“You sure your---” He cleared his throat to try and get his voice back. “---3DS didn’t get fucked when you fell today?”

He’d caught Sanji when he’d tumbled from the skateboard, protected him from harm, but they’d still hit the ground hard, and there was no telling if his 3DS had gotten banged around in his pocket.

Sanji made another worried sound, pulled one hand free from beneath Zoro’s to pinch hard at his nose.

“Shit,” the blond cursed, then, to Zoro’s surprise, opened eyes again and stared right at him to ask,
“What do I do?”

Zoro stared back, almost in shock, unsure he’d ever seen such a fearful look on Sanji’s face before, and certainly not directed at him. He almost leaned in closer, almost bumped their foreheads together just to offer his support, and it rather amazed Zoro to think of just how natural it would have felt.

But only to him, surely. He couldn’t.

“What do I do?”

Zoro stared back, almost in shock, unsure he’d ever seen such a fearful look on Sanji’s face before, and certainly not directed at him. He almost leaned in closer, almost bumped their foreheads together just to offer his support, and it rather amazed Zoro to think of just how natural it would have felt.

But only to him, surely. He couldn’t.

“Calm down,” he said instead, forcing himself to keep his distance, to keep the regret from his voice, though he did give a squeeze to Sanji’s hand. “Let’s go see if it did anything…”

When the two of them arrived downstairs, Sanji with his 3DS hastily shoved in his pocket, the small get-together was as they’d left it, Shanks and Robin now chatting amiably in front of the fire, Luffy and Chopper sitting at the patio table with a rousing game of Jenga between them.

The music still played, and Usopp and his father were still gone, despite how low the sun had sunk in the sky.

Oddly, Franky was missing now as well, something strange considering the man was always eager to see Shanks. It was possible he’d run to get his guitar, but both Zoro and Sanji looked at each other when they heard the man’s loud voice drifting around from the side of the house, laughing and chatting like he was on the phone.

And considering the good news recent phone calls had brought, the two could only assume...

A silent exchange passed between them, right there in the kitchen doorway, Sanji letting out a breath and looking at Zoro with helpless shock, and Zoro clenching his jaw, daring to brush his fingers against the back of Sanji’s hand in subtle support.

It might have been true…. The game might have changed things without Sanji’s control.

“Are you drunk, Shanks?” the blond asked as they reached his chair, and though the man insisted an adamant, “No,” the flush to his cheeks, the three beer bottles at his feet, and the way he yanked Sanji down so he could squeeze his face and press a sloppy kiss to his forehead told otherwise.

Sanji tolerated it with an exasperated expression, though his smile was genuine. It really had been too long since they’d seen their former guardian.

“You too, Zoro, yer not gettin’ away~” the man slurred happily, reaching out to tug the disgruntled teen’s wrist so he could slobber a kiss to his cheek as well.

“Damn, I missed you guys,” Shanks said, still holding each of their wrists. “Sanji, kiddo, you really grew into your nose~ And Zoro, you musta grown three feet since I last saw ya!”
“What the hell is that supposed to mean?!” Zoro screeched automatically, resulting in a bout of hysterical laughter from the full-grown man.

“Means you were a shrimpy little kid~” Shanks chirped. “Like this high~” And he bent over in his chair to gesture low to the ground to illustrate.

“Shut up…” Zoro muttered, whining it again when he noticed the amused smirk on Sanji’s face. “Shut uuuup.”

Sanji merely grinned, as did Shanks, and broadly at that, as he looked between the two of them. Far too many times, in fact, before finally proclaiming, “Y’know, I sure am glad the two o’ you are gettin’ along now~”

This time, both Zoro and Sanji turned to him, synchronised, to simultaneously growl out the third “Shut up,” of the evening.

A huffed breath amidst Shanks’ laughter, and Sanji swiftly changed the subject to an admittedly pressing one.

“Who’s Franky talking to?” the blond asked, jerking his head towards the direction of Franky’s voice, still floating around the corner.

It was Robin who answered, calmly swirling her glass of wine with a glint in her eye that seemed to shine brighter than the firelight.

“He said Galley-La before answering,” she supplied. “They’ve been speaking for a short while now.”

Again, Zoro and Sanji’s eyes found each other, which only served to make Shanks burst out into laughter again until he seemingly remembered something and smacked a fist to his palm.

“Oh yeah, hey, that reminds me~” he said, hushing his voice and gesturing for Chopper and Luffy to join them when the two boys quickly whipped their heads back as if drawn by the very possibility of a secret. They scampered over in a hurry.

“Y’know what ol’ Yasopp’s talkin’ to Usopp about?” Shanks asked conspiratorially, and even Robin looked surprised, her eyes widening marginally in a tiny show of shock.

“He’s quittin’ my crew~”

Chopper and Luffy’s reactions were immediate, the boys’ jaws dropping in identical dismay.

“Whaaaat?” they cried, and Shanks nodded, hardly looking sad about it. In fact, he looked damn excited.

“Yup! Eyein’ up an instructor position at the shooting range outside town. Got an apartment lined up an’ everything.”

Silence befell the group, though Robin’s soft accepting exhale followed first, and then Sanji’s shuddering breath beside Zoro. He felt the blond’s arm brush against his, felt that warmth send a shiver down his skin.

“So does that mean….?” Sanji breathed quietly, and for the first time, Shanks’ smile softened a bit, turned a bit more sober.
“Yeah,” the man replied. “He’s gonna ask Usopp to go with him.”

Zoro’s brow furrowed, especially when he felt a second hush move over the group, broken only by the rock music still playing from the outdoor speakers and Franky’s distant voice in the background, most likely sealing his fate as well.

Sanji hadn’t killed Usopp in the game...so why…?

The blond was asking the same damn question, desperately, in his head no doubt, judging by the stricken expression he wore.

And yet, Luffy and Chopper’s shock quickly morphed into excited screeching, immediately shushed by Shanks who insisted they might be overheard, even though Usopp and his dad were nowhere in sight.

Zoro didn’t know what to think as distractions came over the group once more, Luffy and Chopper literally dragging Shanks and even Robin into their next Jenga game.

They insisted Zoro and Sanji play too, but Sanji mumbled something about cleaning up in the kitchen and started to stalk inside, hands in his pockets.

He pulled his 3DS out before he even reached the door, shouldering through as the light from the screen underlit his face.

Zoro didn’t follow right away, just watched him go for a moment, still standing there by the firepit.

This shouldn’t be strange. There was still free will in the world, obviously. Sanji’s game didn’t control everything. And it wasn’t like anything bad had happened.

In fact, things were great, for so many in their makeshift family now, particularly evident when, as soon as the door closed behind Sanji, Franky appeared from around the corner with an ear-splitting grin on his face, sticking his phone back into the pocket of his Hawaiian shirt.

“So guess who signed on to help design the new cruise ship they’re buildin’ over at the shipyard~” Franky announced, leaning palms over the patio table and pushing up his unnecessary sunglasses to reveal excitement in his eyes.

Zoro listened to the others burst with excitement as well, Luffy immediately asking if he could make it transform into a plane.

Franky laughed and joked with the boys, reaching out to ruffle Chopper’s hair affectionately with promises to get them all free tickets for its maiden voyage.

But then Franky’s gaze fell on Robin, however, who seemed to understand something yet unspoken, her smile supportive but brewing with sadness beneath the surface.

He’d leave too, wouldn’t he…. This was really happening. And fast.

…

“Zoro?”

He blinked, feeling dazed, realizing he’d stayed rooted to the spot for perhaps too long, the rest of the table turned to look at him.

“Hm?”
“Would you mind turning on the patio lights inside?” Robin was asking, and he nodded, a bit glad for the distraction, shuffling across the textured concrete towards the door, the orange squares of light, coming through the panels, stretched long over the ground now.

Robin watched him go, her heart in her throat still from Franky’s news. They would have to talk later, surely…. But a soft chuckle leaving Shanks drew her attention back to the table as Zoro entered the house.

“These two’ve come a long way, huh,” Shanks mused, leaning out of the way to dodge the chaos when Luffy and Chopper started mimicking Franky’s impromptu dance moves that would surely help him pull the perfect piece from the Jenga tower.

She knew of whom he spoke, especially when the warm fairy lights Franky had installed around the patio’s awning came on, illuminating the gentle smile that tugged at Shanks’ lips, twinkling in his red hair.

Robin’s lips turned up as well and she nodded.

“Yes. They have,” she replied simply, but proudly, nestling her chin in a hand again.

Shanks chuckled again, leaning back in his chair to fold arms behind his head, his shirt tugging up a little to reveal abs tight from years of grueling physical labor at sea.

“Kinda reminds me of me an’ a pal o’ mine growin’ up,” he said, more to himself, a nostalgic look in his eye as he scratched at his chest.

“Surely not…Buggy, was it~?” Robin asked, remembering a rather eccentric character the children often told stories about, having heard them from Shanks. If she recalled, this was the boy who’d snuck into a showing of It and unleashed red balloons into the audience…

A loud laugh from Shanks, but he shook his head, waving a hand dismissively.

“Nah, another guy~ Guy who never had time for anything but his video games~”

“Shanks, it’s your turn!” Chopper screeched, interrupting, and the man gave a start, then leaned over to carefully, and with much dramatic finagling, pull out one wooden block from the Jenga tower opposite him.

A cry of victory because the tower didn’t topple.

Despite several pieces already missing, it still stood strong...

Inside the house, Sanji was sitting on the couch in the living room, open marshmallow and chocolate packets left forgotten on the kitchen counter as Zoro walked past.

The room was dark now, no lights turned on since the sun went down, and Sanji’s 3DS was left closed on the couch cushion beside him.

The blond sat forlornly, leaning over his knees with his head in his hands, dragging them down over his face when he heard Zoro approach.

He stayed where he was, almost waiting for Zoro to take a seat beside him, which he did, slowly lowering himself to the couch, eyes on Sanji the whole time.

Neither of them spoke for a moment. They didn’t really have to. They’d both heard what was
happening.

Sanji let out a breath after a minute, bringing his hands to his arms, holding himself lightly.

“Usopp’s gone,” he muttered, and he looked so miserable that Zoro’s desire to reach out and pull him closer was strong. He leaned over his own knees and clasped hands there to stop himself.

“Yeah,” was all Zoro replied with, knowing there was no way Usopp would refuse his father’s offer if he asked him to go with him. It was all he’d wanted the whole time he’d lived here at Sunny.

But Sanji shook his head.

“No. In the game,” he said, and Zoro frowned, lifting his head to look at him again.

Sanji met his eye, and it was clear from the shuddering breath he released that he was trying hard to keep his composure.

“He’s not in the roster,” he explained. “He was there before, you saw. But now he’s gone. He---He didn’t die! He should still be here!”

A small growl and his hands lifted to his hair once more, raking back through it with trembling fingers as he dropped his head.

“Something’s---something’s wrong with it---this isn’t how it was supposed to go!” he choked out, shoulders giving a shudder.

“Curly,” Zoro said softly, straightening and fixing him with a serious gaze.

Sanji ignored him.

“I don’t---what if---everyone else starts disappearing randomly!” he cried, voice rising in intensity.

“Curly,” Zoro insisted again, not wanting the blond to work himself up any more.

“That’s---! That’ll mean---!”

“Sanji!”

Zoro’s hand shot out of its own accord to grab the other teen’s arm, giving a shake to bring him back.

Sanji jolted, head whipping to Zoro with wide eyes that had begun to glisten at some point, glisten and burn with emotion he hadn’t expected to assault him.

Had he ever heard that? Had he ever, in the entire time he’d known him, heard his name spoken in Zoro’s voice?

It was unfamiliar, strange, but something about it had his heart speeding up and his lips parting silently, especially when Zoro’s eyes widened slightly, and, even in the dim lighting, Sanji saw a darker shade of red color the skin over his cheeks and nose.

Zoro looked away, dropped his hand from Sanji’s arm and muttered, “Don’t---be an idiot. Just let it go right now. It’s just a game.”

Sanji felt a twinge of embarrassment spike through his chest, especially after the return of Zoro’s familiar sulky tone effectively ruined the impact his own name had left, and he let his shock simmer
down, blinking several times to refocus himself on the problem at hand.

“But---people are leaving, Zoro!” he stammered, the mosshead glancing over at him again with a look of confusion.

“That’s what you wanted though,” he said slowly, as if to remind the blond of his past convictions. “To help them…”

Sanji huffed, wishing the idiot wouldn’t speak to him like he was a child.

“Yes, but—it’s all so—fucking sudden,” he justified, remembering the panic he’d felt when the game had glitched and the thought had hit him like a freight train that he’d just lost everyone in one fell swoop. That even if their lives would be bettered, in the end, he wasn’t exactly ready for everything to change at once….

“It’s—” Sanji stuttered, trying to explain his feelings without sounding like a hypocrite. “It’s really—I mean, Zoro, what if you—”

He realized his mistake—the specific word he’d let slip—the instant he said it, snapping his mouth shut and cutting himself off.

But Zoro hadn’t missed it.

In fact, far from it. He seemed to react to the very mention of ‘you,’ eyes widening, then narrowing as he tilted his head slightly, almost warily. Perhaps he didn’t really believe Sanji had said it. Sanji himself sure as hell didn’t. Since when was Zoro just as important as the others?

The blond didn’t say anything though, for fear of making it worse, merely turned his head away stubbornly, staring at the dark outline of the fireplace on the wall across the room, willing away the heat that now spread across his own cheeks.

He heard Zoro making dumb noises beside him, the stupid noises he made when he was trying to say something but couldn’t voice it. Fuck. He’d probably weirded him out entirely, if he was smart enough to even get Sanji’s implication.

“I’m…” Zoro finally started, hesitantly. “I’m not—goin’ anywhere, y’know…”

Sanji tried hard to control the breath that left him.

So he had figured it out, and despite the quiet reassurance in his words, Sanji’s first response was to be defensive.

“You don’t know that,” he snipped, clenching his jaw.

Another small noise, an exhale of disbelief this time, from the mosshead, whose hand had risen to rub at the back of his head.

“I don’t…..want to though….not before you,” Zoro said, bewildered. “I told you to leave me anyway. You said….you said you didn’t want to help me.”

There it was. He’d said that. But that had been before….

Before what…? Before he’d realized he’d been wrong about Zoro? That he wasn’t a heartless dick? That he was actually supportive and fun to be around, even as annoying as he was?

Fuck…
He couldn’t look at Zoro yet, not with all of this swirling in his mind, reminding him of how warm Zoro’s skin felt when it brushed his, of how satisfying it felt to make him laugh.…

“I don’t….think I meant that…” he muttered, and this time, there was no reply from Zoro. There was absolute silence, and he figured he’d spilled way too much, that now Zoro was freaked out beyond all measure.

The mosshead wasn’t moving though. He wasn’t getting up and he wasn’t cursing Sanji out or calling him stupid for going back on his word and thinking weird things. Thinking that maybe he actually gave a shit about him now…

Instead, Zoro’s voice, when he finally managed it, was quiet. And it had that tone. That tone Zoro had used with Usopp earlier. The tone Sanji had so wanted to hear directed at him…

“Just….don’t fall apart on me….It’s gonna be okay,” Zoro murmured, even though, unbeknownst to him, it was his voice alone that threatened to undo his friend in that moment.

Sanji nodded jerkily, swallowed hard, hoping he was right.

He didn’t want Zoro to disappear. He didn’t want Zoro to leave. Selfishly, it seemed. Because he’d never had this, never had a friend like Zoro, never imagined he could have one. Never imagined he’d been here all along, and that they’d missed out on so much.

He must’ve been losing his mind, or at the very least coming down with something.

Because he wanted Zoro here. He wanted Zoro to stay with him…

And now he stood to lose him, a possibility Sanji was no longer sure he could handle.
The following evening, all of Chopper’s belongings were piled into the back of Franky’s Hummer, among them several boxes of books stacked beneath two large garbage bags full of stuffed animals, accompanying his clothes and other toys.

There had been considerably more tears as they stood outside in the driveway to bid farewell, Luffy and Usopp clinging to the boy, blubbering sobs of both sorrow and happiness for their friend with promises to visit every weekend. Sanji had heard them say their true goodbyes late the previous night, the three of them huddled under a cozy blanket fort together.

Franky cried openly, practically hugging the car for comfort, and Robin shed graceful tears through a smile as she embraced Chopper tightly, speaking soft words of encouragement to him, fingers stroking affectionately through the boy’s curly hair.

Sanji too had leaked a few tears when Chopper ran at him, the blond accepting the tackle and lifting him up, twirling Chopper in a circle with a few last compliments about how great a friend he was.
It took Chopper a minute to recover from his blushing and dancing, but eventually he turned to Zoro, whose eyes remained dry but whose throat tightened the instant he met the younger boy’s shimmering gaze.

Sanji released Chopper with one last squeeze to his shoulders, his eyes falling to Zoro as the boy stepped up to him silently.

Zoro tried to smile, tried to look like everything was okay when he’d insisted to everyone that it was. He tried to look like he wasn’t losing his precious younger brother, even if Chopper was staying in the city. Even if his life was about to get so much better.

Chopper reached into his jeans pocket unexpectedly, pulling out a small object made of metallic plastic. And when he took Zoro’s hand to press the object there, all of Zoro’s efforts to remain composed threatened to shatter.

Because Zoro knew immediately what that object was, without even looking.

It was the little sword keychain he’d won for Chopper from a capsule machine at the arcade the previous year. He’d given it to Chopper, telling him he could use it to fight off bullies. Or at least to serve as a reminder that he wasn’t alone, that he had people that loved him and would do whatever they could to protect him.

From that day forth, Chopper had kept it on his backpack, the paint growing more and more worn, but the sword’s significance only growing stronger.

But now he no longer needed it, and when he fell forward into Zoro’s chest, the teen was quick to bring arms around him, burying his nose in Chopper’s hair until he felt the tears soaking his shirt begin to slow.

Franky had driven Chopper away, and everyone had slowly shuffled back into the house, Robin ushering Usopp and Luffy to the increasingly empty upstairs so Usopp could continue packing his things. His dad was coming to pick him up the next day...

Zoro had said he’d be okay if Chopper left. Sanji had asked him and he’d insisted he would be, but he’d stood there on the porch for a long minute after Franky and Chopper drove off, features softly lit in the orange sunset, highlighting glassy eyes that watched the horizon steadfastly.

His jaw clenched almost as tightly as his fingers around that keychain.

Sanji had dinner to make, but he stayed where he was, lifting a hand to rub away the last traces of his own tears, drawing his hoodie sleeve over his nose too. Dinner wouldn’t take nearly as long with one less person to cook for.

Not to mention Franky would be late, having to run down to the shipyard after dropping Chopper at Ms. Kureha’s. A few more days to secure an apartment down there and he’d be gone too.

They’d be doing this all over again before long.

And Zoro would be there, a moss-covered rock of strength for Sanji to match. But also one that could slip from the blond’s fingers easily.

He hadn’t touched the game, afraid of what he would find when he opened it, afraid that there would be no more Zoro to stand beside him anymore.

Zoro’s eyes flicked to his suddenly, and Sanji hadn’t realized just how intently he’d been staring at
the other teen, a flood of embarrassment filling him.

In fact, Zoro’s heart had skipped a beat too, finding the blond watching him, and though the pain in his chest from watching Chopper drive out of his life was still there, so was that familiar fluttering that took hold of him whenever his and Sanji’s eyes met, when their skin brushed, or Sanji tolerated him sitting close.

Sanji looked away first, his cheeks seeming to darken even beneath the lengthening shadows of the porch roof, but surprisingly, he brought his gaze back a few seconds later to murmur, “You okay…?”

Something about Sanji’s thoughtfulness brought a lump to Zoro’s throat, and he found himself nodding wordlessly, even though tears did indeed threaten to spring.

Sanji nodded too, started to reach out with a hand, but then seemed to think better of whatever he’d been about to do, shoving both in his hoodie pocket instead.

“If you wanna cry later, I won’t tell anyone,” he muttered as he stepped towards the front door, bumping Zoro’s shoulder lightly as he did, smirking at him ever so slightly.

It had never happened so obviously before, with Sanji right there next to him, but Zoro’s eyes fell to Sanji’s lips, to that endearing tilt and flash of teeth. He hadn’t meant for it to happen.

And then Sanji noticed.

And his smile faltered, though he quickly tried to force it back into place. His cheeks reddened again, and Zoro had to force himself to look away before he did anything he’d regret.

But if he was honest with himself, he might not regret it. And that thought was almost as terrifying.

Sanji said nothing though, just sighed and brushed shoulders with him again before heading inside.

Zoro didn’t linger long before he followed him, trying to keep his fluttering heartbeat under control.

Dinner that night was nothing short of depressing compared to how things used to be. Usopp was quiet, despite Robin’s questions and attempts to get him to brighten up. Franky had called to say he wasn’t going to make it back to eat with everyone, so Sanji had packed his plate up in the fridge. In fact, the blond had seemed almost bored with the lack of activity to attend to, even Luffy’s attempts at stealing food rather lackluster given the absence of open targets.

And Zoro had sat there too with his head in his plate practically, finishing his meal quickly and quietly before asking to be excused.

He needed to be alone. He needed to think about shit, process the fact that his friends were actually leaving, and he needed to process Sanji and what he should do with his stupid feelings when, ultimately, his goal was to see Sanji leave too—to move on to a better life.

He wanted this, but he didn’t, and that was fucking selfish, he knew. Surely he was the only one who felt that way. He just needed to work through how he was going to deal with it when it ultimately happened.

So he’d gone upstairs to his and Sanji’s room and flopped on his bed, pulled out his earbuds and lost himself in some loud classic rock.
It just sucked that every song made him think, in some capacity, of Sanji...

It wasn’t until after he’d cleaned up the meal that Sanji worked up the courage to retreat to their room as well, the sight of Zoro’s arresting stare fixed on his lips stuck in his mind.

It had been such a small thing, and he might have even imagined it or blown it out of proportion, but to him, it had sure seemed like a thing, and it had sure felt like the silent exchange had lasted fifteen heart-thumping minutes.

Dealing with this shit was becoming increasingly more difficult. Sanji did not like this growing panic he felt particularly when it came to the thought of Zoro leaving him. He’d always been independent and self-sufficient, so he didn’t know why losing the idiot would affect him so much. Maybe they could still be friends. Maybe they could still keep in contact somehow.

But it wouldn’t be the same. It wouldn’t be the same as being there with him, feeling the powerful energy he emitted, comforting, intimidating, and challenging all at once. It wouldn’t be the same as hearing his voice or seeing how stupid he looked when he was flustered.

He could imagine Zoro’s face when he teased him, imagine his face when he kicked his ass all he wanted. But it wasn’t the same as the real thing.

As it was, he was terrified to play his dumb game again, terrified to do it without Zoro by his side, because even though things seemed to be happening at random now, having Zoro there almost seemed like a failsafe. If Zoro was with him, then he wasn’t in danger of being eliminated.

This was why, after dinner, he’d headed down the hall to his room, passing Luffy and Usopp’s, which had been a continuous mess of suitcases and boxes ever since Chopper had begun packing.

It was nice to see, when he caught a glimpse through the doorway, the two at least had a basketball game going, with an open suitcase as the hoop, and bunched-up clothes as the ball. Robin sat calmly on the floor with a book in the midst of it all, a smirk on her face as she informed the two boys they’d have to refold everything later.

And Zoro was sprawled on his back, mouth agape and snoring loudly as Sanji pushed open the cracked door to their room, music faintly blaring from an earbud that had fallen from his ear onto the mattress.

Sanji slipped in, knowing Zoro wouldn’t wake up when he shut the door with a click. When he slept, he slept hard, unless he sensed impending doom, whether that be a natural disaster or a bodyslam from Luffy, which were in fact the same thing.

The blond entered the room, took the opportunity to change out of his jeans into some comfortable sweatpants, pulled on some clean socks, then stepped over the tape line, increasingly obscured by Zoro’s clothes strewn across the floor, and maybe some of Sanji’s now too. He moved to Zoro’s bedside and---

Okay, he had not planned on doing that last bit, but there he stood, eyes on Zoro’s face, the other teen’s brow relaxed as he slept, chest lifting with his steady breaths and snores.

Sanji’s hands went right back into his hoodie pocket as he found them itching to reach out for Zoro. He didn’t know what they would do---poke him or---or be more gentle because that was what his instincts were telling him to be.

And that was fucking weird because it was Zoro and when had he ever been gentle with him before?
So he decided to compromise, settling down onto the edge of Zoro’s bed, trying to focus on the strong beat of the song blaring from the earbud between them instead of the similar beat of Zoro’s pulse when Sanji’s eyes took in his angular jawline.

Much easier said than done.

How many times had he seen Zoro asleep before? He shouldn’t stare at him while he was sleeping. It was creepy.

So he reached out to grab Zoro’s jaw with a hand, fulfilling his decided compromise to brush fingers there for just a second before he squeezed hard enough to wake him.

The predicted garbled sound of shock cut off Zoro’s snore and his eyes shot open to reveal Sanji hovering over him with that dangerous smirk, the hand touching his face quickly retracting a second before Zoro became aware of the drool about to cascade from the corner of his lips.

Zoro’s arm shot up, sleeve curled in his hand to wipe away the evidence, a strange feeling in his chest from waking up to Sanji so close.

“What the hell do you want, Curly…” he muttered in his usual sulky tone to cover up his embarrassment.

This had Sanji’s smirk dying a little, however, and Zoro noticed that he didn’t move off his bed, still sat there, even as Zoro tentatively sat up and brought their faces closer.

“I should play again,” Sanji answered, eyes dropping to his lap. “I need to see if anything else has changed, but I’m…”

He trailed off, though Zoro thought he could finish that sentence.

“I just don’t wanna do it alone,” Sanji eventually amended, flicking eyes to Zoro almost expectantly.

But Zoro was already nodding, swallowing hard and hastily ripping his earbuds out, fishing for his phone before realizing it was wedged somewhere under his leg.

“Get your 3DS…” he mumbled, only moving to yank out his phone when Sanji got up to do so.

Had he moved earlier, their thighs would have brushed, and his leg tingled with even the thought...

---

_The first thing Sanjius is aware of is the sound of the ocean, that familiar and comforting rush of water and spray that immediately reminds him of home._

_He could be dreaming, as he has so many times since they’ve left the kingdom, longing to go back, to end their increasingly fruitless journey through lands that are far too foreign._

_He hears the ocean though, and it instantly fortifies his soul, revitalizes his spirit in ways few things can._

_He smells the salt and the grass in the dunes, feels the beating of the sun on his face, the scratch of the sand against his cheek and---_  

_His eyes shoot open, pupils shrinking quickly when the hot pink beyond his closed eyelids becomes a blinding burst of bright sunlight, forcing him to blink several times to adjust._

_No longer is he in the mountains, outside the ruins of Zoua on that grassy hillside. No longer are_
there thick forests in sight, nor any of his friends----

“No!” he stammers in a panic, bolting upright, his cloak spread beneath him like wings and his hair falling out of its tie.

He is on the beach near his castle. He’d recognize those cragged cliffs anywhere; he’s memorized this shoreline.

But at first glance, he is alone with the breeze, and the brilliant sunset starting over the horizon.

Until, that is, beyond the dark line where sand meets surf, he sees, with a jolt of terror, Zorin lying prone, his form half soaked from the water lapping beneath him.

He makes out his slack features, unmoving, and that’s all he needs to see before Sanjius scrambles to his feet, struggling to right himself when his head gives an unsteady spin, but he manages to make it across that line into the wet sand, falling to his knees beside his knight.

Zorin is most definitely unconscious. He might be the only person Sanjius knows who could sleep in the surf, the rush of waves surging directly beneath his ears, but Zorin’s stillness is not sleep and for a terrible moment, Sanjius fears the worst. Maybe Zorin has been able to heal after tremendous injury before, but after losing so many, Sanjius is no longer certain of anything.

Zorin’s chest is hidden beneath a plate of metal armor, so instead Sanjius’ hand darts out to clamp on his jaw, fingers stretching up to hover above his lips.

He waits.

But then he feels the warm movement of air puffing over his fingertips, and he nearly collapses with relief, dropping his head and closing his eyes.

He doesn’t realize how close he’s moved to Zorin’s face until his nose brushes against the knight’s cheek, and unconsciously, he nearly tilts his head to brush lips there before he remembers himself and sits up again.

He watches Zorin’s face for a long moment, listens to the soft white noise of the water as it slides up between them.

His knight is too still, and he has no idea what’s happened. In fact, all he remembers clearly is Francus being swallowed up by that terrifying darkness, the rest of them forced to run for their lives until everything went black.

“Wake up,” he says to Zorin, hand still at his jaw.

No reaction, so he says it again.

“Wake up.”

Nothing.

His hand squeezes tightly, voice turning into a worried growl.

“Wake up!”

Zorin’s features tense, and he makes a small unconscious noise in his throat, Sanjius sighing heavily the second more movement follows.
It takes him a minute, subtle shifting and furrowing of his brow eventually leading Zorin to flutter eyes open experimentally.

As with Sanjius, the brightness of the sunlight catches him by surprise, but the prince waits patiently for Zorin to gather his surroundings until finally, their eyes meet properly.

“Your Highness,” Zorin stutters, pushing up quickly to grab hold of the prince’s wrist, unscarred eye wide as it takes in Sanjius’ status. “Are you---?”

“I’m fine,” the blond insists, knowing he probably looks anything but with how disheveled he is. He’s more concerned with his knight anyway. “You were the one unconscious in the water...”

Zorin looks down, seemingly noticing, for the first time, just where he’s sitting, the water slowly seeping into his boots and armor.

He doesn’t move though, just lifts his head to look back up at Sanjius again, his gaze softening when it meets the tumult in the prince’s.

He remembers too, Sanjius can tell. He knows they’ve lost another, and the fear is real that Usio, Luffient, and Robisia are missing as well. After all, shouldn’t they all be here?

Neither of them moves for a long time. Sanjius feels Zorin’s thumb start to shift against the skin of his wrist, rubbing up and down slowly, soothingly, and that’s when Sanjius notices that tears have sprung to his own eyes.

Hastily, the prince sniffs and brushes them away with his free hand.

“We---We must---the others,” Sanjius says, hardly able to form a full sentence, but Zorin understands, nodding and moving only when the prince does, staggering to his feet, a hand on Sanjius the whole time.

The two of them stand there, a little shaky, trying to get their bearings, but eventually Sanjius’ hand shifts, encircles his knight’s to tug him gently along behind him as he moves down the beach.

He hears Zorin’s breath catch, but soon he follows, his hand warm against Sanjius’ tingling palm.

Just before the prince and his knight round the corner of the cliffs, their footsteps trailing them in the sand, there’s the sound of fierce grunting and frustrated growls, followed by great splashes that aren’t coming from the natural movement of the water.

They share a glance, but keep moving. Zorin at least has his swords at his side, and Sanjius’ emotions are heightened enough that he knows he can take out any foe. He has to.

But it’s not a foe they discover. It’s Luffient making those noises, they find, his hair wild and teeth bared ferally as he takes huge rocks from the shoreline and throws them as far as he can into the water. Again and again, rock after rock. Stones that look far too heavy for a normal person to lift he throws with one hand, until finally he falls to his knees, his armor sinking into the sand, hands lifting to clench in his own hair.

“Luffient!” Sanjius calls out, unable to watch this go on any longer, and he only releases Zorin’s hand to hurry to his other knight’s side.

The younger man lifts his head with a start, eyes wide and shimmering with disbelief when they land on the prince, and Zorin beyond.
“Sanjius---you’re---”

“Right here. I’m alright,” he assures. “And so is Zorin.”

He glances back over his shoulder, but Zorin is moving towards the larger rocks along the shore, and Sanjius notices for the first time that Robisia is seated on one, her wet purple robe nearly black, thin arms hugging herself as she stares numbly ahead of her.

Sanjius lets out a breath, gives Luffient’s arm a squeeze, then rushes to her next, making it to her just as Zorin does.

“Robisia,” he murmurs, quickly unlatching her wet cloak at her throat and replacing it with his own dry one.

She doesn’t move the entire time, prompting him to ask, “You’re not injured, are you?”

She shakes her head minutely.

“Not physically,” she answers quietly, and instantly, the prince’s mind is taken right back to the clutches of that horrible black void, consuming Francus entirely…

His arm comes around her, rubbing up and down in some vague echo of comfort, difficult when he’s beginning to feel as empty as the hole that’s no doubt in Robisia’s heart.

Luffient has gotten to his feet, slowly coming over to their tiny group, his shoulders heaving with breaths that are far too distressed for just standing as he is.

“Where’s---Where’s Usio…?” he asks.

Immediately, Sanjius’ heart drops, and Zorin’s eyes find his, wide and panicked as well.

Luffient’s heavy breaths increase, their silence enough of a terrifying answer for him.

“No---” he stammers, stumbling back a step towards the water. “No---no, where’s---”

Then he turns and screams Usio’s name, loud enough to echo off the tall cliff walls, a scream that is loud, but vulnerable and broken, full of bottled-up pain that’s come from losing his dear friends one by one. It’s evidence that Luffient has been masking perhaps more pain than any of them, because it’s his responsibility---his purpose---to protect. And he’s failed.

Sanjius can do nothing but stare at his knight, at a complete loss for what to do, for how to feel even. How can he continue to feel?

They should look for Usio, but something sinister and defeatist is telling him that it’s no use. That they won’t find him….

Zorin bears his teeth in a pained grimace. Robisia drops her head into her hands.

Luffient continues to call his name, whirling in frantic circles, stumbling in the loose sand.

Sanjius remains silent.

“We need to find Sir Shannik.”

Luffient’s voice is small, broken, a far cry from his normal confidence. He is huddled there on the
sand, back against one of the rocks, knees pulled up to his chest, and his gaze despondent.

None of them have moved for some time, the sun sinking ever lower over the horizon. None of them particularly wants to venture into the town, for fear of what they’ll find, for fear of putting themselves in danger, for once. For fear that their beloved Baratia will look no better than Zoua...

No one answers Luffient’s statement, so he says it again, louder, hoarse with emotion.

“‘We need to find Sir Shannik!’”

“What will he do…” Sanjius mutters in reply, still seated on the rock beside Robisia. “He can’t change what’s happened…”

“I can’t protect us!” Luffient cries, turning a desperate gaze up to his prince, eyes watery with tears. “I can’t do it! I’m not good enough and I can’t help you take the kingdom bac---!”

“Then we’re all going,” Sanjius says, monotone, numb, looking out to sea so he doesn’t have to observe the raw pain on his knight’s face. “We can’t separate. You know what will happen. We’re dead if we do…..” He chuckles morosely. “We’re dead if we don’t---”

“Don’t say that.”

Zorin’s voice cuts in, strong enough to draw the attention of everyone in their small group.

Sanjius slowly brings his head around to look at Zorin, who’s staring directly at him, his eyes dry and fierce.

“Don’t be a damned fool,” he bites out bitterly. “I refuse to submit myself to that fate. I refuse to believe anything is set in stone, and so should you!”

Zorin’s hand quivers over the hilt of his prized white sword, as if he’s just short of drawing it to prove his point. His body trembles with pent-up emotion, visible movement in his shoulders beneath his armor indicating his heavy breathing, and everything about him is so ferocious that Sanjius’ heart automatically picks up.

He is ferocious and alive, actively combating defeat, and though Robisia is still quiet and Luffient is still distraught, Sanjius feels the depressing coating of surrender begin to crack around him, if only a little bit. So long as he keeps his eyes on Zorin.

There’s a long minute of powerful silence, nothing but the rush of the waves to fill it.

Zorin’s voice is softer when he speaks again.

“Luffient’s right. We should find Sir Shannik. We storm the castle as we are, then we’re asking for trouble. We don’t know the state of things.”

There’s a crunch as Luffient’s fingers clench in the sand, Robisia letting out a shuddery breath.

Then a second later, Luffient slowly gets to his feet, reaches a hand out for Robisia to take.

She stares at it dully, but then something seems to sharpen in her gaze, and when she places her hand in the knight’s, she lets out a soothing pulse of healing energy, her magic traveling up Luffient’s arm in a blue ring that disappears into his chest.

Luffient closes his eyes for a moment, eyes that are still red-rimmed, but fierce when he opens them
again and pulls Robisia to her feet.

He spares one last glance at Zorin and Sanjius, then leads Robisia off down the beach, heading east towards the castle with a final determined, “Come on.”

Sanjius doesn’t move, even when the two of them have made it several paces away.

Zorin stays where he is as well, waiting silently.

Sanjius listens to his knight’s attempt to control his breathing, keep it steady when he no doubt wants to sob as much as the prince. He doesn’t know how he knows this, but he can feel it.

“We’ve lost everyone, Zorin,” he states glumly.

“We haven’t,” Zorin shoots back.

Sanjius just nods, his lips turning up forlornly as he looks into Zorin’s eyes, hoping they can rekindle his own fire, his will to fight.

Zorin makes a frustrated noise and moves to sit beside him on the rock.

“We haven’t,” he says again, close to Sanjius’ ear.

From the corner of his peripheral, the prince sees Zorin’s hand start to creep up, as if to brush at his hair, but he quickly retracts it.

Strangely, it leaves the blond with an empty feeling, one he doesn’t fully understand. He shouldn’t need coddling, particularly not from Zorin. He’s a grown man, and their prince. He shouldn’t be sitting here in defeat while even Robisia managed to pick herself up and at least move forward.

Is he that weak? Is he that easily broken…?

Is he foolish for thinking that losing five friends is something that shouldn’t break him?

“I know they’re gone,” Zorin murmurs after a minute, though Sanjius’ gaze stays fixed on the surf lapping gently at the sand, at their footprints from earlier that are slowly filling in, becoming unrecognizable depressions that will soon erase their trail entirely.

There is a long pause, during which Zorin seems to struggle for words, judging by the multiple times he starts to speak but stops himself.

What he does say sends a surprising jolt of warmth through the prince’s heart, and he turns his head, eyes automatically falling to Zorin’s lips when his knight utters his name, not his title, for the first time in his memory.

“Sanjius…”

The prince’s breaths come lightly, and Zorin seems nervous too because he stammers and shakes his head, brow furrowing when Sanjius’ gaze finally lifts to look at him properly. He suddenly has the urge to reach out and touch Zorin’s reddening cheeks.

“I need you to keep fighting,” Zorin finally says, his own steely eyes raising to meet the prince’s. “Fight until there’s nothing left to fight for.”

Until there’s nothing left to fight for…
Sanjius closes his eyes, his mind immediately drifting to his lost friends. To Brokard, Namilia, Chonrad, Francus and now Usio.

He remembers what he’d overheard mere hours ago, during Usio and Zorin’s conversation on the hillside, minutes before tragedy struck.

Zorin had faith in him. Zorin believed in him, and Sanjius doesn’t know why when he feels he can’t rely on his own conviction.

His strength isn’t coming from within right now; it’s coming from somewhere else.

From someone else.

He can’t lose Zorin, he realizes, and it’s a powerful realization at that. If he loses him, it’s over, as far as he’s concerned.

He doesn’t know how to voice this. He doesn’t know how to say it aloud to his knight who, until recently, had been the bane of his existence.

He doesn’t know what to say, needing him as much as he does now, when he never would have admitted that before everything changed.

“Only if…you do the same,” he settles for, opening his eyes and finding Zorin right there, close, watching him intensely.

Zorin lets out a breath slowly and nods.

“Always,” he replies.

Sanji watched the screen go black, taking him back to the map, his small avatar once again bouncing without a care over the jagged coastline near the kingdom of Baratia. There was one path option available, a single orange line leading from his avatar’s current location to the town surrounding the castle.

Sanji left his character where he was, instead setting his 3DS aside on Zoro’s bed.

Zoro’s heart was beating fast after watching that scene play out, so similar to the moment he and Sanji had shared the previous evening.

Surely it was obvious. Surely it was obvious how he felt about the blond, how much Sanji meant to him and how much he hated seeing him uncertain or in pain. How Sanji was his strength, and how he wanted him to be okay.

Sanji was quiet too, and Zoro wondered, a little fearfully, what he was thinking, if seeing a similar scene in a different context would make him clearly see Zoro’s unsaid feelings.

He wasn’t sure if he wanted this, so he didn’t have to say it himself….or if he’d rather it be a secret forevermore. Either way, he was certain Sanji couldn’t feel the same. Ultimately, the question was which would be less painful, in the end…

“So Usopp’s really gone…” Sanji muttered eventually, and despite his indecision, Zoro felt his heart plummet a little with disappointment, disappointment that Sanji didn’t address the conversation.

“That leaves Luffy, Robin, and….,”
He trailed off with a sigh, finally bringing a tired gaze up to meet Zoro’s.

There was one thought clear in Zoro’s mind, seeing the haggard expression on his face, as if the burden of the game was physically heavy on his shoulders.

“Let me play,” Zoro said. “Let me do it. It’s stressing you out way too damn much.”

“No, mosshead, I’m fine,” Sanji replied dismissively. “I’m just….gonna wait until Usopp leaves before I do anything else. And hope it doesn’t fucking glitch again…”

“Why can’t I, Curly?” he pressed. “You can watch if you want, but at least it won’t be all on you---”

“Because, Zoro!” Sanji cried. “I know what you’re going to do, and I’m not okay with that!”

“And you think I’m okay with watching you sacrifice yourself for everyone else’s happiness?!”

“It’s not a sacrifice! The game is mine! I’m the only one who can---!”

“I found it first, stupid! It’s just as much my responsibility!”

“Well, too bad, idiot! I’ve already decided I’m gonna get you out of here so---!”

Both of them stopped as soon as the words left Sanji’s mouth, staring at each other with comically wide eyes.

Zoro’s stomach did a flip, heartbeat practically thundering in his ears at this point.

He wanted to grab Sanji suddenly, grab him and---he didn’t know what, but he wanted to keep him there, with him. He didn’t want Sanji to fucking do that for him when it would leave him all alone. They’d talked about this, and it shouldn’t feel so traitorously good either, to think that Sanji had decided to help him first.

Zoro didn’t grab him, but instead, he shoved him. Right in the chest.

“Why do you always do this?” Zoro cried, hating that look of resignation on Sanji’s face. “You think you don’t matter! You think you---!”

“That’s not true…” Sanji cut in quietly after catching himself with a hand on the mattress, not moving to hit Zoro back, but rather staring at him dully.

“Yes, it is!” Zoro insisted, thinking of how many times the blond had come to bed far too late after talking one of the younger boys through a tough time, or forgotten to study for an important test because he was too busy helping Nami study for hers.

“Yes, it is!” Zoro insisted, thinking of how many times the blond had come to bed far too late after talking one of the younger boys through a tough time, or forgotten to study for an important test because he was too busy helping Nami study for hers.

“You put everyone else before yourself every damn time when you shouldn’t!” Zoro continued, even if it had never happened to him. He’d never been the one Sanji wanted to help. Until now, apparently…

“What the hell are you doing then, you damn hypocrite!” Sanji retorted, a bit of spark returning to his eyes as the argument escalated.

“I’m doing it for selfish reasons!” Zoro barked back instantly, and though his stomach dropped a little at the admission, Sanji was still glaring at him, and that was enough to spur him on.

“But I can’t fucking think about---about you being alone!” he continued, frustrated with himself and his inability to properly express his stupid feelings that complicated everything, especially now.
“You already were before you came here—-you don’t need that again!”

“Well, neither do you!” Sanji shot back quickly.

“Well then what the fuck do we do?!”

It was a question to Sanji, but it was also a question to himself, a question that ate at him every time Sanji smiled, every time he said shit like he was saying now, when he showed he actually did give a fuck about him.

He looked at Sanji desperately, desperate for an answer, a remedy, closure, anything to combat this confusion he had, this feeling that made him want to pull the blond closer, even if they seemed destined, at this point, to part.

Zoro’s eyes were wide, and so close to helpless that it nearly took Sanji’s breath away, the blond squirming under the pressure to come up with an answer that would be good enough for Zoro. He knew how stubborn he was, but even this didn’t seem like stubbornness. It was much more unsure, much more fragile, and Sanji wasn’t sure he’d ever seen that look in Zoro’s eyes before.

He brought a hand to his head, scratching through his hair, features scrunching up as he tried to think of some compromise.

“What if…” he started. “After Luffy and Miss Robin——we leave it. I won’t touch it. Neither of us will…”

He didn’t like the thought. He didn’t want to risk Zoro’s future so readily.

“But it deleted Franky and Usopp on its own…” Zoro replied, his argument admittedly sound. “What if it happens again——or what if nothing happens.”

Of course Sanji was afraid of this, but there was nothing else he could say just then to make Zoro give up his conviction.

“Then isn’t it just like——life?” he tried, feeling like he did so often in literature class, pulling some bullshit analysis out of his ass. “Whatever happens, happens?”

Zoro wasn’t satisfied. That much was obvious by his unhappy silence, the frown on his face.

Sanji wanted Zoro on his side. He wanted his full support on the matter, and he could tell the idiot was still warring in his mind.

Considering how much of an emotionally stoic rock Sanji used to think Zoro was, he was now coming to realize just how readily the guy actually wore his emotions on his features.

Or maybe that was just around him…

Still, he tried to lighten the mood, reaching out to jab Zoro in the side.

“Come on, mosshead,” he said. “Not gonna come at me with some brave line about combating fate——?” Just like his game self had…

But Zoro didn’t rise to his teasing, merely gave a frustrated growl, reaching out to push Sanji halfheartedly on the arm.

He was quiet, and when he pulled his hand away, his touch trailed slowly over Sanji’s arm, leaving a path that prickled with what felt like warm static over Sanji’s skin, though he might have imagined it.
Surely he had, even if Zoro’s gaze had fallen forlornly to his hand, staring at it like he’d felt something too.

A few silent moments, permeated only by the soft orchestral music of the game playing from the 3DS, and Sanji’s own heartbeat, which was deafening, he thought, until finally, Zoro moved again, scooting himself off the bed and instantly bending to scoop up a pair of sweatpants crumpled on the ground.

He mumbled something nearly unintelligible about getting changed as he gathered up yet more fallen garments and headed for the door.

Sanji couldn’t help but feel an immense disappointment, a fear that maybe he’d said something wrong, hurt Zoro for real.

He sat there on Zoro’s bed, watching him go, and even if Zoro was just going to the bathroom, already the spot beside him felt empty, terrifyingly so, a sad premonition of what might be their future.

But then Zoro paused in the doorway, a soft breath leaving him and his head angling towards the blond.

“Thanks…anyway…” he murmured, voice quiet and almost shy.

His face was half hidden behind the open door, but Sanji could still see the pink rising to Zoro’s ears, complementing his green hair like a vivid watermelon.

“For what…?” Sanji breathed back, rather taken by this image, particularly when Zoro peeked an eye at him, his hand anxiously fumbling with the doorknob.

“For wanting to help me….” he mumbled back, nearly inaudible before he quickly disappeared from view, closing the door behind him.

Sanji’s heart skipped a beat.

He pulled up his knees and buried his face there to hide the redness rising to his own cheeks.

With a trembling hand, he reached out to snap his 3DS shut, Zoro’s face stuck in his brain and confusion surrounding his heart.

The next day at school passed normally, but it was full of a sad anticipation. Usopp wasn’t changing schools. His dad’s new apartment was still within the school district limits, but, yet again, it was a day of lasts.

His last breakfast at Sunny, eating a fantastic meal prepared just for him by Sanji, who paid special attention to include all of Usopp’s favorites, syrup drawings on his pancakes and all.

It was the last time they’d all go to school together, the four boys, Luffy, Usopp, Sanji, and Zoro, three bikes and a skateboard along the pale sidewalks, already heating up from the morning sun, the call of seagulls greeting them as always.

It was the last time Usopp would park his bike in the garage, unable to take it with him to his dad’s. Luffy insisted he could still come visit, ride it whenever he came, but both Sanji and Zoro knew that wouldn’t be happening if they had their way. There’d be no one left to visit.
He wasn’t even eating dinner with them, Shanks and his dad planning to pick him up shortly after school.

It was a day of many lasts, but it was also a day of firsts, for Sanji in particular, who awoke thirty minutes before his alarm with a strange fluttering in his stomach, particularly when he became hyper-aware of Zoro’s snoring across the room.

He’d rolled over onto his back, turned his head to look over at his sleeping roommate, and it was a sight he’d seen countless times before.

Zoro was flopped there unceremoniously, one knee up in the air, blankets tangled around his legs, and a flash of midriff visible beneath his loose T-shirt, which had ridden up in the night. His mouth was open, just waiting for spiders to crawl in, and his hair was mussed, features softly lit by the horizontal bars of sunlight that filtered in through the window shades.

There was a soft gurgle beneath his snores, most likely due to the drool that spilled out of his mouth and soaked the pillow beneath.

It was pretty damn vile.

But it was the first time Sanji hadn’t scoffed in disgust, hadn’t turned right back over to sleep the extra half hour until his phone alarm buzzed beside his head.

It wasn’t that he found the sight itself entrancing, no. Most certainly not.

It was just…..Zoro.

Zoro and everything he was, everything he’d turned out to be, which still surprised and baffled Sanji to this day.

By the time the half hour was up, Sanji had curled onto his side, still watching the idiot quietly, and he’d determined a few things, some of which he was okay with….and some of which were affecting him significantly.

He and Zoro were friends now. He was okay with that, happy about it, and Zoro was too. Zoro was still an idiot, and he still pissed him off to no end, but the fact that this hadn’t changed was good.

Because all day, through homeroom, all his classes, lunch, everything…. He couldn’t understand why Zoro wouldn’t leave his mind. They didn’t even have their shared study hall that day, but Zoro’s smile, how it had felt when he’d said Sanji’s real name….the strange tingling feeling he got whenever their skin brushed….how Zoro had held him protectively at the skatepark when he’d fallen….

These memories continued to flash through his head, so much that he couldn’t concentrate on his studies. Final exams were the following week. His teachers were reviewing and cramming like mad, but not even that, nor his melancholy over his friends’ departures, could distract him from the weird-ass emotions that were plaguing him about the mosshead.

Maybe it was regret. He’d had that before, thinking about what a damn shame it had been that their friendship had only started now. That it had taken the threat of being pulled apart to push them closer together.

Surely it was regret. He would miss Zoro when he went. Because despite what he’d said to him, Sanji was still determined. He would help Zoro, even if it made Zoro angry. He’d thank him in the end.
Not that he wanted thanks…..

He just….wanted the idiot to be happy…..

It took up to the hour Usopp was leaving for Sanji to shake his thoughts, Zoro, Sanji, and Luffy all gathering in what was now, sadly, only Luffy’s bedroom, Usopp’s empty bunk bed now joining Chopper’s across the room.

The four of them sat on the floor, just as they had with Chopper, and said their goodbyes, even if they knew they’d see each other again. It was the end of an era in their lives, and it was one none of them wanted to forget, Luffy and Usopp snapping goofy pictures on their phones, clearly trying to pretend everything was okay.

And it was. Everything was great. Usopp was finally getting to live with his dad, who’d kept his promise, even after so many years. Both father and son had always wanted this reunion.

But it was still bittersweet when Miss Robin and Franky appeared in the doorway to call Usopp downstairs. Franky’s hand was rubbing softly at the small of Robin’s back, and his grin was a little smaller than usual when he heaved one of Usopp’s suitcases over his shoulder like it weighed nothing, knowing it was the last time he’d do so until he carried his own belongings out in a few days’ time.

Usopp had taken one last look at the room around him, swallowed hard and leaned desperately into Luffy’s embrace when the other boy draped himself over Usopp’s shoulders.

He looked to Zoro and Sanji for support, the two of them doing their best to exude their usual calm confidence, though it was clearly wavering. They could both feel it.

Still, they headed out into the hallway to the staircase to wait for Yasopp and Shanks, and it was over, just as it had been with Chopper, Nami, and Brook.

Sanji swallowed hard as he reached the top of the stairs, about to follow the others down when, suddenly, he felt a hand clamp onto his wrist, his heart instantly leaping into overdrive.

He looked up just in time to see Zoro mouthing a few words to himself, almost as if he were practicing what he wanted to say.

“Curly…” he managed, lifting eyes nervously to the blond’s face. “Can we---?”

But then the doorbell rang. And the moment was quite obviously shattered, Zoro’s hand immediately falling away forlornly with a muttered curse under his breath.

Still, Sanji’s heart hammered, even as Franky opened the front door in the entranceway below them, Shanks striding in with a bold, “Heya, kiddos!”, Yasopp smirking close behind.

Zoro was already starting down the stairs, mumbling, “Nevermind,” but whatever force had kept Sanji’s thoughts on him all day left the blond standing there in his wake, swallowing hard, now fully obsessed with whatever Zoro had wanted to ask him.

The game. The game could get him to do it. He was sure of it, thinking of that little ‘B’ that still hovered over their avatars, the fact that advancing that could help nudge the real Zoro along.

He’d said he wouldn’t play….

But maybe….what Zoro didn’t know….
Sanji shoved hands in his pockets and started down the stairs too.

Later, he promised himself. Later...

Walking through the cobblestone streets of Baratia feels like a dream, and a terrible one at that. It’s the first time Sanjius feels unwelcome in his own city, having to pull his cloak hood low over his face, just in case he is recognized. Robisia insisted he wear it again for that reason...

Of course, with only four of them on foot, it is easy to move more inconspicuously, but it also puts them directly into the heart of the damage wrought upon his beautiful home.

Buildings have been razed, businesses and homes alike destroyed, burnt shells of their former facades. Animals, far more than usual, roam the streets, homeless chickens, dogs, and cats searching, disoriented, for where they once belonged.

The smell of cinders is in the air, no longer the sweet smell of the ocean, nor the vendors selling hot food, no scent of bread wafting from the bakeries.

The city is gray, the streets devoid of hustle and bustle, the only voices those of men calling orders, clacking wood, hammering, the desperate struggle to rebuild underway but fueled by little enthusiasm or vigor.

All of the prince’s banners, the proud sky blue flags Usio helped create, with Sanjius’ own self-designed crest that once hung from every streetlamp, are gone, ripped, burned, some lying in tatters on the dirty ground. Every last one.

They’ve been replaced with a swirling pair of sixes, dark black over a deep crimson, the heavy fabric sinister as it flaps like the beating of ominous wings along the gravely quiet roads.

Sanjius feels as desolate as his city, as broken and weak, and he wonders how he’s able to walk through, show his face here when he ran, abandoned his people. He’d been selfish, even if he’d told himself he was getting help. It didn’t matter. It had been foolish and fruitless. And now he was ashamed to have lost not only his friends, but his kingdom.

If he’d put his people, his loved ones first...he could have saved them.

Zorin is beside him, staying close the entire time, close enough that their arms brush, the warmth that permeates each time it happens the only thing keeping him moving, keeping him from completely collapsing.

Somehow, Zorin has become his rock, the hand that finds his back now and again his only driving force. He thinks of Zorin’s words from earlier, and he knows now that Zorin is the only one who can keep him fighting. He is the only one holding him up from the depths of his despair. Even if Luffient’s powerful resolve is unwavering, it’s Zorin’s fierce eyes he thinks of, his quiet strength and his voice which sears in his mind.

He finds himself stealing glances at his knight, whose jaw is clenched tight, brows drawn in as he scans every side street and alley for potential danger. His left hand is attentive to Sanjius, but his right remains poised on the white hilt of his most precious sword.

He looks like himself, but he doesn’t, Sanjius thinks. He looks older, but also more vulnerable, particularly when he flicks eyes to Sanjius now and again, accidentally making eye contact before he quickly looks away. It’s strange and flighty, and the prince averts eyes as well, but it leaves a curious fluttering in Sanjius’ stomach every time he feels his knight’s eyes land on him again.
He walks closer to Zorin’s side, eager to enter the safety of his space, to ignore what he sees around him, the sadness and gloom.

Luffient, leading their small band, steers them towards the far end of the docks. Whether it’s a conscious decision or not, Sanjius doesn’t know, but he is silently grateful. He doesn’t want to see any more destruction. He doesn’t want to see the castle, which no longer belongs to him. He fears what awaits him inside.

What they find, anchored far out to sea, nestled near a group of large concealing crags, is a ship, a familiar one, a massive schooner with a flag fluttering from the crow’s nest, white with three red slash marks painted diagonally across.

“He’s here,” Luffient breathes, stopping precariously close to the edge of a dilapidated jetty, thick seaweed puddled in the water beneath.

He stares at Sir Shannik’s ship with an equal amount of awe and hope, his stance a little taller than it has been, a little stronger. His arm twitches, fist clenching, as if he wants to reach across the very ocean and grab hold of the ship, fling them there himself.

But he can’t, and it’s only when Robisia touches his arm and murmurs softly about finding a rowboat that he relaxes and the frustration seems to melt off him, if only a little.

She loops her arm through his, steals a brief glance back at Sanjius and Zorin, still standing, stoic, at the top of the steps that lead down to the docks.

Luffient makes eye contact with Zorin first, a silent message passing between them before his gaze lands on Sanjius.

“Sir Shannik is gonna help us,” Luffient says, and it’s clear that the knight who trained him is the one holding him together right now, even just the thought of him. “This isn’t over.”

He says it isn’t, but it is. Sanjius knows this now and accepts it. Maybe there’s a bigger war to fight, but for now, they’ve lost their own battle, and he desperately wishes they could stop to pick themselves up. Right now, as they are, he fails to find a reason they should regain hope.

But then, a hand finds his wrist, warm and supportive, callous fingers curling over his pulse point gently.

“We’ll search this way,” Zorin murmurs, jerking his head in the opposite direction, where little else lies besides a few charred lots where houses once stood, the low stone wall that protects the buildings from the sea broken and crumbling as well.

Sanjius narrows eyes, knowing they won’t find a boat there, but Luffient nods as if there’s nothing off about his suggestion, reaching up to pat Robisia’s hand at his forearm before the two start off down the bleak dock together.

As soon as they’re gone, Zorin tugs him, a little roughly, but it’s good because it jolts Sanjius from his thoughts, keeps him from focusing too much on the rows of destroyed vessels that now float, little more than driftwood lined up in the water. It stops him from thinking that it’s more likely they’ll need to build a new rowboat than find an intact one.

Zorin leads him down the stone steps, onto the slick wood of the dock that lines the wall that towers up above them now.

He stops at a patch of sunlight, between two smaller sailboats with broken hulls. The breeze is
warm, the sound of water lapping gently beside them, the boats giving their occasional creak or groan as they slowly rise and fall with the waves.

Zorin stops, turns to face Sanjius with his hands finding the prince’s biceps.

“Earlier. I’m sorry, but I lied,” he says, the prince’s heart leaping into his throat automatically.

Lied? Zorin lied? He tries to quell any hurt, any fear that threatens to overtake him, though it’s already beginning. He can’t stop it.

“I’m going to the castle,” the knight continues. “Tonight. I’m going to kill whoever is holding your throne.”

Sanjius’ jaw drops, his voice coming out as a hissed shriek as panic instantly fills him.

“What---on your own?! You most certainly are not going in there alone, Zorin, are you mad?!”

Zorin’s grip on the prince’s arms tightens.

“If I take Luffient, he’ll announce us immediately. I can’t let Robisia fight anymore. And you’re the Prince! You’ll be a walking target---!”

“I don’t care about that!” Sanjius cries, and he lifts hands to shove Zorin hard in the chest, the sound a loud slap of his palms against slick metal. Zorin doesn’t budge, but still he growls, “Do you think I’m going to let you risk your life just for---!”

“Stop!” Zorin grits out, quickly snatching up Sanjius’ wrists in both his hands. “Do you see that ship out there? The deck is empty! Sir Shannik might be dead for all we know! If someone doesn’t do something, then the kingdom’s lost!”

Rage, barely masking a burgeoning fear, fills Sanjius, capping the thoughts he’s had all day, that he needs Zorin with him. Zorin is the only one keeping him together right now, and if something happens to the damned bastard, then---

“Why does it have to be you?!” the prince shouts, and it’s a question that’s not merely about this situation.

He doesn’t understand why it’s Zorin. Why has Zorin become his source of strength? Why is the thought of losing Zorin of all people the one that plagues him the most?

He struggles to be free of the knight’s grip, eventually lifting a leg and pivoting himself to try and kick out Zorin’s knee.

It’s a move that will surely only land him in the water, but Zorin predicts it, bending low and shoving all his weight at the blond, slamming him up against the wall and pinning him there.

His chest presses directly into the prince’s, and though it’s covered with armor, Sanjius can still feel the heavy rise and fall beneath. Zorin’s face is close, close enough that he can see the details in his fierce iris. Unable to look away, quick pants leave the prince as well, and he’s glad for the armor between them because his heart begins to pound in his chest, tingles of something shooting down his entire body.

For a long moment, he can’t say anything, and it seems Zorin is at a loss too, the frustration and yet determination to get something out written all over his features.
“Because---” he starts, his voice low. “I want you safe, Your Highness.”

He shakes the prince’s wrists hard against the wall to drive in his point, and he doesn’t move off him, as if he can physically block Sanjius from coming after him.

Sanjius’ heart hammers and his breath stutters because there’s an edge to Zorin’s voice, one that is new. Zorin isn’t simply doing this for his job....

“You can’t think that my life---” Sanjius breathes, hushing his voice as well, eyes stuck on Zorin’s. “---is more important than yours....it’s not...”

“It is---” Zorin shoots back.

“It’s not!”

“It is!” Zorin insists, baring teeth. “I trained for the castle guard so I could protect you!”

“But---” Sanjius stammers. “Why! I thought you couldn’t stand me...”

Zorin growls, finally releasing Sanjius’ wrists roughly, backing up and lifting a hand to rake through his hair, then down his face, over his mouth.

He says nothing, but he shakes his head, ears reddening, staring hard at the water lapping at the wood beneath their feet.

Sanjius feels as if he’s missing something, something important, and his mind flashes back to the forest, outside the witch’s hut, just before Namilia had---

He stops himself from remembering the wrong thing, instead focusing on what Zorin had said, how he’d seemed disappointed that Sanjius hadn’t remembered something.... It had, understandably, slipped his mind over the following weeks, but now....

“Zorin....” he murmurs, stepping off the wall to turn his knight towards him, studying his sulky features that he still seems set on keeping averted.

Why is he disappointed? Why is he so upset in reaction to the prince’s words....?

This is not the same Zorin from the start of their journey. Surely not...

“Zorin, what have I forgotten...?”

Again, Zorin shakes his head, but this time, he chuckles a little, though it’s a tired sound, not borne from amusement.

“It’s not your fault,” Zorin mutters. “It was---so long ago, and---you’re the Prince. I’m certain you had better things on your mind than...”

He trails off, but Sanjius isn’t letting him. He kicks him in the shin and urges sternly, “Tell me,” knowing his knight is incapable of refusing a direct order.

Zorin scowls at the kick, looks about to raise a fist and retaliate out of habit, so Sanjius takes that fist in his own hand, covers it and implores again, more gently this time, “Tell me.”

Zorin lets out a breath, then looks directly into the prince’s eyes, seems to draw upon some sort of resolve there because a second later, he speaks.
“When I was ten,” he says, not looking away from Sanjius’ face, enough that the intensity of his gaze has the prince’s heart speeding up. “My sister and I were orphaned. We had no food, nowhere to live, nothing. We made it for a while on scraps, but people stopped being so generous…and she grew weak.”

Sanjius swallows, not sure why Zorin is telling him this, particularly when he’s never told him before. He’d never known Zorin had a sister, and while he assumed the knight’s parents were not involved in his life, he had no idea Zorin was an orphan…

He feels a strong pang of empathy, suddenly, learning they have more in common than he’d thought. Even if his own father is still alive, he feels no connection or love for the man, who would rather conquer his kingdom than show him any care. As far as he is concerned, he doesn’t have a father either.

Still, Sanjius remains silent, sensing that Zorin will speak again.

“One day, I went into town,” he continues, his gaze dropping to the dirty fabric of Sanjius’ collar, no longer its brilliant clear blue after so many weeks of wear and tear. “I left my sister in the woods and I decided to go to the palace itself. I don’t know what compelled me to do so, but…”

He shakes his head.

“I never made it that far… I collapsed in the street, and when I woke up there were soldiers surrounding me.”

Sanjius watches the look in Zorin’s eye, how far away it is.

“And---you---you don’t remember this, but….you appeared,” Zorin murmurs quietly. “And you had a whole damned basket of bread and meats. You could barely carry it… You told me to take it and---and you smiled and just---”

Zorin lets out a breath, lips turning up ever so slightly, his face now tinted red. He lifts his gaze and Sanjius realizes, with a knock of his heart, that Zorin is looking softly at his lips.

“That was it,” Zorin says. “But… It saved our lives…and ever since, I knew I wanted to serve you. To try and repay you.”

The prince stares at Zorin and racks his brain desperately, searching his memories of countless visits to town, countless times he’s helped feed his people, tries and tries to remember how it had felt to---

His eyes widen suddenly. A vivid memory of his first time preparing a cut of beef. He’d nearly chopped his finger off that morning. He remembers spilling too much salt in the meat seasoning. Patriz had been angry. He remembers one of the young maids hurrying fearfully to clean it up, insisting it was her fault, and he remembers assuring her it wasn’t, that he wanted to fix it himself.

He remembers sitting in the carriage with that huge basket on his lap, on his way with Robisia, and Francus, driving the horses, to visit a school, legs too short to reach the floor as the coach bounced around on the cobblestones.

They’d slowed, finding a gathering of distressed soldiers on a road near the castle, and there he’d been. A weak little boy dressed in rags, and the young prince had made the decision that this boy needed the food far more than he, or even the children at the school, all of whom came from families with steady incomes.

He’d felt sad for the boy, sad that he could live such a difficult life, even in his beautiful kingdom, but
he’d put on a smile just for him….

Had Robisia and Francus known all along? Had they known who Zorin was…?

“That was….you were that boy…?” Sanjius breathes, and Zorin’s eyes widen briefly, face turning a darker shade of red.

Still, he swallows and nods tentatively.

Sanjius lets out a disbelieving chuckle, lifting a hand to his head.

“You must’ve been properly filthy if I couldn’t recognize your head of moss.”

Zorin shrugs.

“The food was good anyhow…” he mumbles sheepishly. “Little salty I think, but…”

Again, Sanjius chuckles, eyes falling to his other hand then, which he realizes is still holding onto Zorin’s gently. He doesn’t let go.

“I’m sorry I didn’t remember…” he murmurs, silently comparing his own slender fingers to Zorin’s more rugged ones. He meets Zorin’s eye again. “Your sister…?”

He’s worried to hear the answer, considering there’s been no mention of her ever, and considering Zorin remains quiet for a long moment after he asks.

He squeezes the knight’s hand to encourage him.

Zorin, surprisingly, turns his palm to lace their fingers instead.

“Just before I came to serve you,” he says. “She took a fall. Down a flight of stairs. Broke her neck, and she was gone. Just like that. I truly had nothing left to lose by joining your army…. I wasn’t expecting you to remind me of her so much….and it was painful….despite how much I’d wanted to come....”

There is pain in his voice, but also acceptance, and it’s that fact that clenches hard at Sanjius’ chest. Zorin came to him a little over a year ago now. And he knows a year is never enough time to fully grieve.

“I never knew…” is all he can say, and it’s hardly adequate.

Zorin’s aloof attitude, his irritability and desire to focus on nothing but training….if he hadn’t lost his sister, perhaps things would have been different.

“No one did…’cept for Chonrad,” Zorin admits, shifting himself a little closer, the two of them nearly chest to chest once more. His lips turn up a bit. “And do you know the first thing he said after I told him?”

Sanjius shakes his head, wondering if Zorin can feel his heartbeat slamming in his chest.

“He asked if I’d told you yet.”

Some of the tension leaves the prince, who offers a small smile too, particularly when Zorin’s widens more.

“I’m….happy....” Sanjius murmurs slowly, at a loss for words when all he can focus on is the slide
of Zorin’s thumb which starts at the back of his hand again. There is something utterly bewitching
about even that small contact.

“....that things are the way they are now....between us...” Sanjius manages, and he finds he can
think a bit clearer when, just as soon as it starts, Zorin’s thumb stills.

And then he’s pulling his hand away gently, expression more serious.

“The way things are....yes...” he agrees with a half-hearted nod.

Sanjius isn’t sure why a strange pang pokes at his heart suddenly, only bringing back the very
catalyst to this whole conversation.

“That’s why....I can’t lose you,” he asserts again, swallows in anticipation of what he will reveal
next. “I can’t lose....the man who became my best friend.”

He watches Zorin inhale shakily, waits for the teasing he may be subjected to at such an admission.

But it doesn’t come. Zorin merely nods, letting out the breath he’s taken just as shakily.

“You won’t lose me...” he says, almost inaudibly, and Sanjius can feel something’s changed in the
air, enough that he touches Zorin’s forearm instinctively.

“What’s the matter...?” the prince presses.

Zorin just shakes his head again with a tiny smile, finally lifting his head to look the prince in the eye
again.

“I....would you really have....married a foreign princess...?” he asks.

His tone is teasing, and it lacks the disdain of when they’d first discussed this, or rather, growled it at
each other all that time ago, before so much happened.

There’s something about Zorin’s question, or maybe it’s the little smirk on his lips, but Sanjius finds
himself fixating there. And for a fleeting moment, there’s a powerful feeling, something he’s never
felt before, never in the presence of a man, and certainly not when it comes to Zorin...

It’s something forbidden and dangerous and he can’t even think it, and yet the temptation suddenly
springs him, shoots through him thrillingly and almost rebelliously...

He holds it back. He has to, instead falling quiet, merely shaking his head minutely in answer to
Zorin’s question, an almost sad smile coming to his lips.

“But you were planning to,” Zorin presses, reaching out to poke him in the chest.

The prince’s insides twist and flutter, struggling desperately against his own resolve, the resolve that
is keeping him from touching Zorin again, as he unexpectedly wants to. It keeps his hands from
running through his hair, his eyes from getting lost in Zorin’s dark one, from falling under the spell
of his crooked smile.

“Yes, but...” He swallows. “I’m not so sure I need to anymore...”

Silence comes over them once more, though something else hangs there too. Something so close to
regret that it scares the prince. It scares him and forces him to insist again, so that maybe their
future won’t be cut short.
“Promise me that I won’t lose you, Zorin,” he breathes. “I can’t…”

He means it, and he’s sure Zorin can sense it, maybe even relates to it when he stares back so desperately. Sanjius can’t tell what he’s thinking, but his expression mirrors his own so well behind that thin invisible veil that separates them. It nearly takes his breath away.

Zorin sighs after a few moments, almost in concession, closes his eyes briefly.

But when he opens them, there is conviction there, and his hands are back on the prince’s.

“Then come with me tonight,” he says resolutely. “You’ll make sure it doesn’t happen.”

Zorin’s eyes are bright, despite the fading sunlight and the desolation surrounding them.

Sanjius refuses to let that light go out.

The light of the screen faded, the picture with it, and Sanji found he was trembling, his grip on his 3DS slick with sweaty palms, heart thumping a mile a minute as he stared at the small dialogue box that popped up as soon as the conversation ended.

‘Rank A achieved!’ it declared proudly, but that wasn’t the issue.

What followed was, and, sure enough, when he tapped the A button, another message appeared, one that sent a new and terrifying mix of both uncertainty and exhilaration shooting straight through his chest.

‘Do you wish to proceed to S Rank?’

He knew what that meant, and this was why, after saying goodbye to Usopp, after everyone had eaten dinner and Zoro was preoccupied talking with Luffy, Robin and Franky having a serious conversation in the kitchen, he’d stolen away. Far away.

He’d taken his bike and rode away from the house, down to the beach where the empty docks sat, jutting out from beach houses that were only in use during the summer months, but now sat vacant and quiet, save for the distant sound of some hammering coming from a few maintenance workers down the street.

He’d pulled up to one of his favorite houses, the Warrior of the Sea, with a welcoming, pale yellow facade, and half circle windows that seemed to be smiling at him, contrary to its fierce name.

His bike he left in the parking area, propped against one of the house’s stilts, and he’d snuck around back, sat himself on the house’s private dock between two empty motorboats in an effort to have privacy for what he knew he would soon face.

S Rank. The romantic rank in games like this.

The game was asking him if he wished to pursue a romantic relationship. With Zoro’s character, but considering how he knew the game to affect real life….

If he accepted, would Zoro suddenly fall for him? Would he fall for Zoro? Did he want that? Or perhaps the better question was, could he make sense of that?

He liked girls, as far as he knew, always had. He wasn’t into guys. He couldn’t–– couldn’t––force Zoro into something anyway, his own sexuality aside. He and Zoro had agreed not to touch the game, aside from helping Luffy and Robin. He’d already broken that rule, if only to talk with Zoro’s
Forcing someone to feel something they didn’t…that wasn’t right. It wasn’t.

Sanji selected ‘No’ in answer to the question, hastily shut his 3DS as soon as it took him back to the map screen. He shoved it aside and pulled his knees up to his chest, staring at the water and lifting trembling hands to wipe at eyes that were mysteriously wet.

Zoro hadn’t known what had compelled him to stop Sanji at the top of the stairs, at the worst possible time with Shanks and Usopp’s dad arriving. But his conviction worked in strange ways and seemed to follow no one’s schedule. He hadn’t even been sure what he wanted to say to him. Everything he could possibly think of just sounded stupid and would surely end in the blond putting him down.

Because he knew what he wanted to tell Sanji. He wanted to tell him, before it was too late, before either of them did something stupid and broke the little pact they’d decided upon…..

He wanted to tell Sanji how he felt. How he really felt about him. His deepest secret that he hadn’t even wanted to admit to himself for a long time, knowing nothing would ever come out of it.

But now, they were friends, and part of him, a part that grew with each passing day, had begun to hope he could at least get it off his chest without Sanji berating him or teasing him mercilessly.

But then he’d sink into uncertainty, into the fear that it would thoroughly ruin everything they’d built so far. That they’d be separated, never see each other again….and it would all end on a terribly awkward, sour note.

Because there was no way Sanji felt the same.

Zoro was terrified. But Sanji told him he cared. Sanji wanted to help him, so surely he could talk to him. Maybe he could even bring it up differently, pretend it was someone else and ask the idiot’s advice, for that other person that most definitely wasn’t him…..

Fuck, it was stupid. It was all so stupid, and the only thing that served to clear his head, remind him what was important was Sanji himself, being with him, and letting him, everything he was, soothe his nerves.

After dinner, he’d talked to Luffy, sat with him in his now empty bedroom, let the younger boy slump against his shoulder and cling to him for a bit, just to remind him that he was still here.

Luffy had taken everything so well, on the outside. He’d smiled and been so genuinely glad for each of their friends. He still was. But alone with Zoro, Luffy had simply murmured, “It’s hard….“ the statement carrying far more weight than it should for a young kid of fourteen.

Zoro had simply nodded, lifted a hand to gently muss through Luffy’s hair until he’d felt the boy’s weight grow heavy against him, soft snores following. Still, he sat there in the darkening room, thinking of Sanji until Robin poked her head in and offered to take over.

The sound of Franky’s Hummer starting in the garage told him the man was heading out to the shipyard, and Zoro heard no more noises in the kitchen, nor the TV downstairs. His and Sanji’s bedroom was empty.

So he’d taken his skateboard out into the evening, unsure of where he’d find him, but knowing he would, somehow. It seemed he always did.
And he had, riding the few blocks down to the oceanfront, where he knew Sanji liked to go to think. It was just a hunch, but it still hadn’t taken long to spot his bike, its long wonky shadow standing out beneath one house amongst the straight, uniform ones of the house stilts.

He rolled his skateboard up with an extra kick, coasting onto the smooth pavement of the driveway and hopping off, leaving his board next to Sanji’s bike and heading straight on through to the wooden walkway that cut through the tall seagrass behind the house.

The grass was warm and dry, ghosting over his bare calves as he walked, tickling his arms, the sound of the wind through the plants a soft whisper above the applause of the ocean beyond as he stepped through the curtains of greenery.

The walkway split, one leading to stairs that climbed to the upper deck of the house, the other stretching to the docks beyond, and sure enough, a familiar shape sat huddled on the dock, blue between two bookends of white, the motorboats accompanying him silently.

Zoro heard Sanji sniff, the teen wiping his face against his T-shirt sleeve, and it was then that Zoro noticed the 3DS resting beside him on the ground.

His heart sprang to his throat, fear for what he’d done….or what he’d discovered….filling him instantly.

But he forced himself to keep his pace steady as he approached, finally lowering himself down to sit cross-legged beside him, careful not to block Sanji’s view of the sea.

Sanji huffed out a breath, sniffled again, and Zoro noticed the tears which were slowly ravaging his face.

“Idiot…” Sanji muttered, seemingly on reflex alone, maybe to preserve a semblance of pride, though he needn’t have worried about that now. “How did you…find me…?”

Zoro just shrugged, his heart still pounding hard because of his lingering fear, but now, he’d found Sanji in tears, and that was enough to crank his anxiety up even more.

He waited a minute, during which Sanji tried hard to clean himself up, before he muttered, “Did you play?”

“I…” Sanji started to say, his guilt completely obvious, which he admitted to a second later. “Yes…but not to do anything! Or I mean---I just wanted to see---urgh….” He trailed off for a few seconds. “Nothing happened. Everyone’s still….there…”

Then why was he so miserable-looking, Zoro wondered? Was it because Usopp had left? Maybe…..but then why would he be messing with the game? Nothing else had happened that evening, no fortuitous visitors or phone calls, so Zoro had to believe he was telling the truth about him doing nothing….

“The game…” Sanji said suddenly, knees pulled up to his chest and his gaze on the horizon. “It’s not our life….you said…..it’s….they’re just characters. Their stories are different, but how much is---?” He growled under his breath, cutting himself off. “Ugh, it’s stupid.”

“So?” Zoro immediately countered, a little too quickly, but he didn’t care. He had something stupid weighing on him as well, and maybe this was his opening. Maybe if he showed Sanji they could talk about stupid shit, then he’d have a better shot at explaining himself….

Sanji made a frustrated noise, sliding hands back through his hair, where they stayed.
“I just---” he tried again. “How much is….similar, I wonder…”

Zoro’s mouth was dry, thinking back to the game conversation he’d witnessed at the skatepark and the previous day, how so much of his own thoughts and feelings had been mirrored in those interactions onscreen, enough to make him nervous that Sanji would see right through him.

Right through to the part of his brain that told him Sanji looked incredible there with his hair practically glowing in the sunset. The part that wanted to brush fingers across his jaw, comfort him far more tenderly than he ever had before, make him feel secure and accepted, just as he’d made Zoro feel through their newly-found friendship.

“You know I never hated you...not even when we first met…”

The words fell from Zoro’s mouth before he could stop them, but they were true, and he wanted Sanji to know this.

“You got a funny way of showing it then…” Sanji muttered, and Zoro winced a little.

He was right. None of this was Sanji’s fault, at least not initially. It was because of Zoro that things had been tense between them.

For the first time, Zoro had the chance to explain, and though his heart was slamming against his ribcage, he forced himself to continue.

“I just…..you reminded me of someone...someone who…”

He trailed off and sighed, knowing it would be confusing to start there, so he tried again.

“I came here ‘cause my last foster dad gave me up.”

“Yeah, I know…” Sanji murmured, blue eyes, still wide and shimmering, shifting slowly to look at him.

“Yeah, but…” Zoro said, and this was the painful part. “He was probably gonna adopt me….but….his daughter….his real daughter….she died. And...I dunno, after that, he didn’t want me or---couldn’t---I got no fuckin’ clue. I was angry and---and---that girl was like my sister, so I was---”

“Grieving,” Sanji interrupted, letting out a shaky breath at the realization and running a hand over his face. “Fuck…”

Emotion came over Sanji’s features again, his lower lip trembling a bit, though he tried to hold himself together.

Zoro’s eyes burned too, struggling to push the memory from his mind, of hearing that tumble down the stairs, of the ambulance….watching the paramedics as nothing worked…

“You reminded me of her...so much,” he admitted quietly. “And---I couldn’t stand it at first. It was just---stirring up all these dumb emotions and---I just didn’t want to deal with any of it. So I shut down. Shut you out… I wish I hadn’t but...I mean, I was ten, I…”

There was no excuse, even being as young as he had been. Why the fuck should he have punished Sanji, who he knew was coming from a similarly tragic situation? He remembered the blond trying to reach out….. He remembered the blond slowly giving up…..

Zoro didn’t realize tears had sprung to his own eyes until it was too late. He wasn’t actively crying
yet, but dammit, he was close, closer than he’d been in a damn long time, and his voice was thick when he continued.

“I just---didn’t want to look at you, didn’t want to---to hear your voice, not when you had---the same sense of humor, the same---fucking strength---I just couldn’t fucking---”

Sanji didn’t say anything for a long time, didn’t move, didn’t do anything.

Now it was Zoro’s turn to wipe frantically at his eyes, try and get himself together when Sanji probably thought he was pathetic for being so damn emotional. He was sixteen. He was too old for this. He’d never shown emotion like this before. Not to anyone, but definitely not to Sanji, and it hurt his heart so much to think of the blond putting him down for it.

“Zoro, did you love her…?”

He stopped, in the middle of swiping his T-shirt sleeve over his eye, and looked at Sanji with surprise.

It took him a minute to answer, stammering slightly until he managed, “Y-Yeah…..she was my best friend…”

Sanji nodded silently in understanding, and Zoro found himself desperate, desperate for Sanji to just get what he was implying, that he meant just as much, if not more now, than Kuina ever had. He wanted to say it, but it seemed his own throat was blocking his words, and he didn’t know why.

“I never hated you…” he nearly whimpered instead, again, sniffling a few times.

Again, to his surprise, the blond’s lips tilted up a bit, almost in relief. Zoro stared, scared, transfixed.

“It’s not true---” Sanji said, still with that tiny smile. “Well, I only didn’t like you because I thought you didn’t like me---”

“Don’t,” Sanji said, his hand landing immediately on Zoro’s free one, resting on the dock beside his hip. Sanji’s warm hand covered his and squeezed comfortably. “Things are good now, right?”

He squeezed again and it was like he’d sent a jolt of electricity up Zoro’s arm, straight to his chest where it jump-started his heart, especially when he met Sanji’s gaze, which was fixed directly on his.

Things were good now. Things were incredibly good, and Sanji had no idea. No idea just how good he made things simply by sitting there, smiling, touching his hand and reassuring him.

Things were perfect. He shouldn’t be afraid. He should get out of his own head, be brave. He should tell Sanji just how amazing he made him feel, just how invincible and happy and all that stupid sappy shit and---

Sanji was talking again, murmuring, “We’re---friends and---and---”
But he trailed off when he noticed something had changed in the other teen, the way Zoro was looking at him, so intensely, almost in awe of him, shaking his head slightly.

“What…?” the blond asked, raising a brow.

Zoro sprang forward suddenly, lips first, to smash his to Sanji’s in what was unmistakably a kiss, despite how clumsy and impulsive it was.

Sanji’s eyes widened immensely, his body freezing in place.

Nothing happened aside from Zoro providing a warm pressure for a long moment and Zoro’s hand shifting beneath Sanji’s to lace their fingers. He didn’t touch him more than that, didn’t try to push the kiss deeper. In fact, he pulled away rather quickly, huffing out a hot breath over Sanji’s lips.

Sanji sat there like a deer in the headlights, honestly feeling numb, unable to react.

What was he supposed to do? He’d never kissed anyone before, never been kissed. And furthermore, why had this happened? He’d specifically chosen not to proceed to S Rank in the game. He didn’t force Zoro to do anything, but Zoro had, and dammit---

He had. He really had! Zoro had fucking kissed him! Zoro! Why? How? Was he dreaming?

“I like you, Sanji…” Zoro suddenly stuttered in one nervous breath. “A lot….I have for a long-ass time…”

Sanji was speechless, utterly speechless, stuck between feeling flattered and terrified. His heart was fluttering out of control as he tried, and failed, to process what had just occurred. His lips still tingled, as if Zoro had never broken contact, and his hands began to shake.

And the first stupid thing that fell out of his mouth was, “Zoro…you’re….gay?”

He immediately kicked himself mentally afterward.

But Zoro stayed close, didn’t pull into an offended scowl or anything of the sort, still inches from his face, the heat coming off his cheeks palpable in the air between them.

He cleared his throat awkwardly and mumbled, “If that’s what….liking you makes me then….yeah, guess so, but….it’s only you and I don’t know if I even…” He sighed and seemed to give up on explaining himself fully. “I just know you make me feel really damn good.”

Sanji trembled even harder as Zoro voiced aloud something he’d also thought to himself. Only recently, but he’d definitely thought it, that he felt good, felt better, whenever he was with Zoro.

Did that mean he liked him back?

Fuck…

He wasn’t sure he was ready for that, if it was even true. He didn’t know what he felt beyond a deep and growing desire to keep the other teen in his life.

Zoro was waiting for him, surely, judging by the way he watched Sanji’s face, eyes wide and scared just like his, but searching for something, some response.

“I-I don’t…” Sanji stammered, unable to make words come. “Zoro, I…”

Zoro quickly pulled his fingers from the blond’s and sat back, giving Sanji space, looking away.
“It’s okay…” he said quietly, and yet it was so pained that Sanji immediately grabbed him back, clamping hands down on his arms despite how terrified he was.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he implored, all but begging Zoro to see this. That was the last thing he wanted.

Zoro slowly brought eyes back to Sanji’s insistent ones, unable to help the sharp breath he sucked in when the blond slid his hands lower to hold Zoro’s wrists. Sanji could feel Zoro’s pulse racing there.

There was a long moment of understanding between them, Zoro finally murmuring, “I know.” He did know now, for sure. And that should have been enough. Surely wanting more was selfish, especially when Sanji clearly didn’t.

“I just—” Sanji gritted out, a growl of frustration leaving him. “Fuck…” Zoro knew he’d screwed up. He’d burdened him with this. Now Sanji felt bad…maybe even pitied him.

He didn’t want that.

“It’s fine, Sanji…” he assured, embarrassed.

The blond dropped his head helplessly and said nothing more.

All the emotion that had filled Zoro just a minute ago seemed to drain, his eyes and throat burning, but dry.

Hadn’t he known this would be the outcome? Shouldn’t he have known…?

“I’m sorry…” he whispered, and though Sanji shook his head in response, still held onto him, it was like he couldn’t feel it.

Sanji was right there in front of him.

But he could have been miles away.
This chapter is dedicated to the lovely treya-barton on Tumblr (and AO3)! Thank you so much for supporting me on Ko-Fi and for the kind words of encouragement! I hope you enjoy!

It was a wonder Sanji was able to concentrate at all on his final exams with every other crazy thing that was weighing on his mind.

He managed to make it, barely, through cramming and sleep deprivation the night before each test. He managed, through mindless repetition of his notes and slamming back leftover Cokes that Franky had left in the fridge.

Franky had moved out two days after Usopp, the house quiet and the garage terribly empty without his huge Hummer to fill it.

Sanji’s head and his heart, however, were both completely full of nothing but thoughts of a certain mosshead who, one week ago, had given Sanji his first kiss and simultaneously plunged him into confusion and uncertainty.

His exams, at least, had been a minor distraction, for both of them, but now that the school year was ending, so were all responsibilities, and that was bad when he desperately needed something to take his mind off the fact that he still vividly remembered the feeling of Zoro’s lips on his.

He’d tried to act normal. He still talked to Zoro. He’d meant it when he said he didn’t want to hurt him, and his way of doing that was continuing as if nothing had happened, even being nicer to him than normal.

Maybe this wasn’t right. Maybe Zoro would get the wrong idea, but Sanji did not want anything to be awkward between them, not when so much had changed. He still wanted Zoro in his life, and he wanted Zoro to know that he was still there for him.

But the looks Zoro would give him….the sadness that he masked well when in the presence of others, but not so well when the two of them found themselves alone….

It hurt Sanji’s heart to think of what he was doing to his friend, after vowing so adamantly to help him.

He just….didn’t know how to tell him.

He didn’t know how to tell Zoro that he didn’t think he liked guys, and he didn’t want to mistake whatever good things Zoro made him feel for actual romantic feelings.

But he also didn’t know how to tell him that what he did feel was amazing….empowering and exhilarating, and it made him want to spend every second with the guy, even if they were just bickering. It was something he’d never felt this strongly for any of his friends….

Still, until he was absolutely positive one way or another, he did not want to jump into that pool.
Zoro had apparently liked him for a long time, something Sanji had been completely oblivious to. But this was new to him. He’d thought about kissing some girls before, but this was Zoro, and the thought of kissing him was….not as disturbing as it should be. And that was also scary, because how the fuck was he supposed to go through life, move forward with anything, if he apparently didn’t even fully understand himself yet…

He thought he had…

But…

Fuck.

This was why the week had sucked. Even the last day of school had sucked because of all the confusing shit.

Zoro was in full view, from where Sanji sat in homeroom, diagonally ahead of him and a few rows over, waiting for the final bell to ring. Zoro sat there, and he was wearing a white T-shirt that made him look extra tan, which was nice, and he kept clenching his teeth impatiently as he watched the clock, and there was something about the way it squared off his jaw that was also nice and---

By the time the single note bell finally sounded, several of their classmates giving an elated cheer, Mr. Foxy scowling in turn, Sanji’s ears were hot and his heart was pounding in his chest. Why? All he’d done was stare at the familiar mosshead.

Everyone began to bound out of the classroom, eager to get the hell out of there for the summer, but Zoro hung back near the door, as he had for a few weeks now, clearly waiting for Sanji. Though every time he did now, he had a look about him, like he was waiting to walk the plank, eyes unable to meet Sanji’s for long.

Still, Sanji tried to look casual, reaching Zoro’s side and shouldering him playfully out the door, bodily pushing him in the right direction, so he wouldn’t get hopelessly lost on the way to their lockers.

He heard Zoro make a disgruntled noise, drawing a smirk of satisfaction onto Sanji’s face.

“So,” the blond said, a strange feeling of almost giddy excitement in his chest when he looked at Zoro. Obviously it was because school was finally out and not because their arms kept brushing. “Ice cream at the pier. Let’s go celebrate.”

Zoro drifted towards the wall, their arms no longer constantly touching. He glanced over at Sanji for a long moment as they walked, his cheeks red and a brow raised, almost in confusion.

Finally, he cleared his throat a little awkwardly and said, “Can’t. Promised Luffy I’d go ride around downtown with him.”

Sanji blinked.

“Seriously?” he asked, his pace slowing unconsciously. “You’ve got a date with Luffy?”

Instantly, Zoro froze, stopped walking entirely, two kids behind him nearly colliding into his back with muttered irritation.

Sanji realized his odd wording a second too late. Why the fuck had he said that?

Instead of regret it, he flared up defensively, stopping too and backtracking to face Zoro.
“Urgh, you know what I meant,” he said, rolling eyes, a scowl on his face and a sudden sour tone to his voice. “Anyway, whatever. Don’t get lost, mosshead. Luffy’s locker’s that way.”

He hitched a thumb over his shoulder towards the intersecting hallway ahead of them. Then, with one last muttered, “See you later,” he turned on his heel and slunk into the moving current of students, leaving Zoro standing there in his wake, completely baffled at the sudden sulky change in the blond.

Honestly, for a fucking week, things had been weird.

Of course they were. He’d confessed his fucking feelings to Sanji, only to be predictably rejected. And that was one thing. He figured, after the initial pain and heartbreak, that it was something he could adjust to, or at least force himself to for Sanji’s sake. He thought Sanji would talk to him, set some boundaries, and then they could move on, even if it was damn tough for a while.

But he hadn’t. In fact, Sanji had tried really damn hard to pretend everything was normal after that, but it fucking wasn’t. It wasn’t even normal for how things had become between them.

No, Sanji was suddenly doing things for him. More so than usual. He was making sure he got his favorite foods. He was talking to him even more, and, weirdest of all, he was getting touchy, physically touchy. Like just a minute ago when he kept brushing his arm, but it wasn’t just then.

Sanji would kick his shins, push him more, smack him more, and not just on his arm, but on his chest, his cheek. He’d touch his hair, ruffle it, or smooth it down. Zoro knew it was happening more frequently because he was incapable of forgetting every time they’d ever touched. It was impossible to when Sanji’s touch had always been electric…

Zoro knew nothing about anything, nothing about relationships of any sort, platonic or otherwise, but he knew that Sanji was acting different, and he didn’t know why.

If Sanji felt bad for him, was trying to make him feel better….well, it hadn’t worked at first. It had made him sad and angry with himself, embarrassed, and he wished he could have told the idiot that, but he probably thought he was helping the situation….

Yet, the longer it went on….the less it felt like obligatory pity….and the more it seemed almost like subconscious flir---

No. He wouldn’t allow himself to even go there because it would just cause him more heartache. As if he didn’t have enough of it just being around Sanji now, remembering exactly how his lips had felt, thin, but warm, how he’d felt Sanji’s rapid pulse through them.

He knew---he finally knew how incredible it felt to kiss Sanji.

And he couldn’t do it again.

“Aw, where’d Sanji go? He coulda come with us!”

A sudden voice to his left, and there was Luffy, having come up beside him at some point, the boy bouncing slightly in place, his hands clamped onto the bright red straps of his backpack.

Zoro stammered for a second, but found he couldn’t answer, just shaking his head eventually and shrugging.

Luffy’s lower lip jutted out in a pout, but then he too shrugged a second later and grinned.
“Kay, well, let’s go!” the boy chirped. “I wanna get pizza!”

Zoro sighed, working to calm his heartbeat that was still thumping a little too quickly in his chest from thinking about Sanji.

“Pizza…? It’s three fifteen,” he muttered, falling into step beside his friend when Luffy took a few skips forward.

“So? Robin gave us that cash on Wednesday for cleanin’ the garage! Gotta use it!”

Zoro stared at the boy, deadpan.

“You didn’t clean shit, remember? You rode my skateboard around the whole time.”

“Oh yeah, that was fun! You took a nap in the yard though.”

“Only ‘cause Sanji was already doing everything.”

Luffy laughed raucously and threw an arm over Zoro’s shoulders roughly.

Thankfully, it drew a smirk onto Zoro’s features, even if his gaze drifted down the hall, towards where the blond had disappeared.

Thirty minutes later and both Zoro and Luffy were multi-tasking rather precariously, both of them with greasy paper plates holding huge cheesy slices of steaming pizza that they struggled to eat while riding their respective skateboard and bike.

Zoro had a bit of an easier time with both hands free. Luffy, on the other hand, was swerving all over the sidewalk trying to catch falling bits of sausage from his meat lover’s slice.

Still, there was no need to stop, despite the many benches in the park close to Bonney’s Pizza Shop. It was a hot day, and it was better to keep moving in the muggy heat that was probably too much for pizza, but that hardly mattered when there were arteries to be clogged and tongues to be burned.

They rode down their favorite streets, the lazy residential ones lined with palm trees where they could play chicken with oncoming cars and feel the cooler shade of the leaves.

It was therapeutic, even after the pizza was gone and the plates had been frisbee-tossed into random people’s trash bins. It certainly allowed Zoro to take a deep breath and escape from the anxieties that had been clenching at his heart. He wanted to be with Sanji, but he could only take so much pain.

Maybe this was why he found himself muttering, as they finally coasted through the stone entrance gates of the local university, “Hey, Luffy. Can I ask you somethin’?”

Luffy, ahead of him, craned his neck back around to look at him, chirping, “Yup!”

Zoro quickly gave a kick on the sidewalk to speed up and prevent Luffy from crashing blindly into anything.

“Have you noticed anything….different….about Sanji lately?” he asked, the two of them turning onto a sidewalk that cut across a large grassy area where many students lounged in the sun.

Luffy effortlessly ducked out of the way of a rogue volleyball that nearly hit him, shrugging.

“I dunno. Still seems like Sanji to me!” he replied. “But did you hear his voice crack the other day?
That was real funny! It’s getting all deeper! He sounds *like this.*”

Zoro snickered at Luffy’s ridiculous imitation, remembering the sound of Sanji’s changing voice. Particularly amusing….and pretty damn attractive.

He shook his head though. That wasn’t what he was getting at.

“Yeah, he sounded dumb,” he mumbled, and despite wondering if he should clarify, one look at Luffy’s cheerful but seemingly oblivious smile was enough to reassure him. “But I mean---have you noticed him acting weird---around me…?”

There was that same edge of hope, audible, and maybe he should have kicked himself for it, but dammit, what else was he supposed to hold onto?

What if Luffy hadn’t noticed though? What if it was all in his head? What if he’d only imagined Sanji pushing himself closer…?

But Luffy had an answer, one that was completely unexpected and yet completely sincere in the way only Luffy could manage.

“It’s ‘cause he doesn’t want you to leave,” Luffy said, shrugging and staring at Zoro for a long moment before turning his head back towards the pathway ahead of them.

Zoro nearly flew off his board in surprise when his wheel hit the next crack in the pavement. He jolted, flailed arms, then had to madly kick off the ground to catch back up to Luffy.

“What?!” he cried breathlessly, his heart suddenly thumping fast in his chest. “How do you know? Has he talked to you about it?”

“No, but it’s Sanji,” Luffy chirped, narrowly missing a collision with a few pedestrians who had to scramble onto the grass to avoid Luffy’s cruising bike when the boy looked back over his shoulder at his friend. “S’not hard to figure out, Zoro~”

Usually, a mocking tone from Luffy would be cause for irritation, but instead, all Zoro could think about was what Sanji had said to him before. How he wanted to help him finally, wanted him to have a better life. Zoro wanted this desperately for Sanji too, and of course he didn’t want him to leave, despite this, but he never imagined that Sanji would feel this way about him. If it was even true…

“Yeah, but…he never said that to me,” Zoro mumbled, a pathetic excuse considering Luffy was almost always right about things, especially when it came to his friends.

Zoro’s feigned skepticism hardly registered on Luffy’s radar, the boy merely shrugging again and stating, “Everyone’s leaving and it’s weird. Maybe he doesn’t wanna talk about it.”

Zoro fell quiet, hearing, for only the second time ever, Luffy even mention a tiny hint of his feelings about his friends’ sudden exits from his life. It had to look strange to him, surely, for all of this to be happening so quickly, so surprisingly. There was no way Luffy could guess the true reason why it was happening, but he must have done some thinking, however shallowly, about why all this was happening.

“Just ask him, I dunno,” Luffy was saying. “It’s just Sanji.”

But it wasn’t just Sanji now. For the first time, Zoro felt a sliver of guilt in his heart, about the pain he’d inadvertently helped cause Luffy too. It was a sudden stark understanding of how Sanji had felt
numerous times.

“Luffy….” Zoro said quietly, tilting his body as the path weaved around a tree, his hand reaching out to skim over the trunk as he did. “Do you ever think about….being the only one left…?”

If this troubled the younger boy, he didn’t show it. The only clue that the question did have a little more weight was the two seconds of silence that followed it, nothing but the sound of Luffy’s bike tires smoothly coasting over the pavement, along with the louder clatter of Zoro’s hard wheels against the textured concrete.

But then Luffy answered, “I’d be okay. Especially if all you guys are happy,” and shot Zoro a carefree grin to illustrate his point.

Zoro had to believe this would be so, for himself, because he knew Luffy wouldn’t have to worry about this, should he and Sanji have their way.

Luffy may have been younger, but he’d been unfailingly reliable for as long as Zoro had known him. He’d been a source of strength for Zoro himself on many occasions, whether he knew it or not. Zoro always tried to be strong for the others, but the fact remained that he didn’t always feel it, and it was those times that he relied on Luffy and his boundless optimism and resilience.

Fuck, he’d miss him when he left.

“Yeah…” he said simply, finally tilting up lips a little, deciding to trust in Luffy’s words.

Luffy seemed pleased with his response, however short it was, and the conversation fell away as they neared the edge of the expansive green, where the pathway connected to proper sidewalk again beside the busy college town street.

Luffy was veering left at the little intersection, so Zoro followed him.

They’d made it past about five parked cars on the side of the street, when a loud voice suddenly yelled, “LUFFY!”

And immediately, Luffy braked hard, tires screeching to a halt, fast enough that Zoro actually rode past him, had to quickly skid to a stop as well. When he looked back at his friend, Luffy was stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, his eyes wide and his gaze fixed straight ahead at seemingly nothing.

An orange Jeep with gaudy flame decals, several cars behind Luffy now, had its passenger door wide open as a blond guy flew out of it, leaving the door wide open in favor of sprinting up to Luffy. From the driver’s side, the door slammed and another guy with darker hair practically rolled over the hood of the Jeep to chase after him.

The blond stopped a few paces away from Luffy, chest heaving with quick pants, stumbling forward when the second man nearly barreled him over in his haste to join them.

“Luffy…” huffed the second man, whose brilliantly freckled face looked just as stricken as the younger teen, who had yet to turn around. “Is it really….?”

He couldn’t finish, trailing off, but Luffy had already answered his question when his breath hitched, a soft sound of shock leaving his lips, eyes beginning to shimmer. To Zoro’s surprise, he looked ready to cry.

Slowly, almost fearfully, Luffy finally looked back over his shoulder.
“Sabo…..Ace…!” he whimpered.

It had been a long time since Zoro had witnessed Luffy openly sob. Yes, he’d gotten emotional recently, but it had been quiet, less cathartic and more accepting of the circumstances and how things were changing...how people were leaving.

Zoro had always admired Luffy’s strength in that way. He’d met Luffy when the boy was a mere eight years old, and it had been Luffy who’d helped Zoro adjust to his new life. It had been Luffy who’d helped fill the void left by the family that had given him up. Luffy had been sunny and strong, and Zoro had always wondered how he’d come to be that way.

He’d just never expected the very two reasons to ever crash their way into his path.

Luffy was trapped in a vicegrip between the two strangers, who weren’t strangers at all. They were his brothers, his foster brothers from his first home, the ones he talked about nonstop but had been taken from his life when their foster mom was accused of theft.

And now the three were together again, somehow, Luffy a sobbing mess right there on the sidewalk, crushed in their embrace. Zoro could do nothing but stare, a strange twisting in his chest at the sight.

“W-What are you doing here?” Luffy blubbered into Sabo’s chest, tears soaking his button down.

The blond was grinning broadly, tears in his own eyes too, arms firmly encircling Luffy’s head.

“There was an open house today---I’m looking at the college!” he exclaimed. “Ace just came for the hell of it.”

“Shut up!” grumbled the freckled man, voice muffled and suspiciously wobbly, his face buried against Luffy’s shoulder.

Sabo merely chuckled and squeezed Luffy tighter.

“What about you?” he asked.

“I---I came from---from school!” Luffy stuttered back, tapering off into more dramatic sobs.

This had Sabo’s eyebrows shooting up, brown eyes wide. He finally pushed Luffy back to try and get a look at his face.

“Wh---you live around here?!”

Luffy sniffled, tried to hold back more sobs, wiping at his runny nose and staring up at his taller brothers with a watery awe-filled gaze.

He nodded, looking between them, seemingly unable to decide which to fixate on. They were so much bigger, so much older, but they were still his brothers.

“Y-Yeah, at---at Sunny,” Luffy answered, prompting Ace and Sabo to immediately catch each other’s eye in confusion.

But neither seemed ready to question just yet, both turning their attention back to Luffy. Ace put his hand on Luffy’s head, brushing some of his hair from his face.

“We’ve been looking for you…” he said. “Your grandpa—that dumb geezer—he wouldn’t tell Dadan where you were…”
“Da---Dadan?”

Zoro found himself lost as the two brothers began to detail to Luffy events that the younger boy seemed to follow, but left Zoro in the dust. This Dadan person had been recertified as a foster parent in a different state, somehow cleared her name. She’d found Ace and Sabo, and they’d lived with her out of state, but not Luffy, and honestly, Zoro knew the details didn’t matter.

Because this was Sanji’s doing. It had to be. There was no other explanation as to why these two would miraculously reappear in Luffy’s life after so many years. This was Sanji’s doing, and Zoro hadn’t known he was going to do it.

Why would he play the game without him again? Why was he doing this when they’d agreed to stick together?

It hurt. It was beginning to hurt a lot more than it should, and Zoro wondered if he should have gone with him after school instead of with Luffy. Maybe Sanji was mad at him. Maybe Sanji was trying to blaze through the game quickly now.

Maybe he really was going to actively kill Zoro off…

And surely it was because of the kiss…. 

“Look, Zoro, it’s Ace and Sabo!” Luffy chirped suddenly, breaking Zoro’s increasingly more morose train of thought, addressing him for the first time since the brothers had appeared. “They’re my---”

But Luffy trailed off, furrowing his brows and tilting his head at his friend.

“Hey, Zoro. You okay? What’s up with you?”

Zoro’s breaths were coming heavily, the pain in his chest very real, twisting and wrenching at his heart in a different way than it had in the days since his confession. Despite what Luffy had told him not long before, Zoro began to wonder if Sanji didn’t want him to stick around after all.

And yet, no matter how painful that question might have been, he was done running. He wanted the answer straight from Sanji’s mouth.

“Luffy, I gotta go,” he blurted out, uncaring of how strange it might look. His eyes flicked to Ace and Sabo, the two older teens watching him curiously. “A-Are you---?”

Capable of getting home on his own was his initial thought, but that was stupid so he cut himself off. Luffy was still looking at him funny, but after a few seconds, he merely smiled, understanding Zoro’s unspoken question.

“I’ll text Robin! I’m okay!” he assured with a cheery wave that managed to be genuine despite the tear tracks that still hadn’t quite dried from his cheeks.

Zoro nodded silently, tried to smile at Ace and Sabo. But there was nothing else to say, so he dropped his skateboard to the sidewalk again and kicked off hard, determined to get home as quickly as possible.

For the first time in a while, Sanji was in a sour mood thanks to Zoro. He was a rational person. He knew he had no business getting pissed that Zoro had chosen to hang out with Luffy over him. He
knew he could have absolutely tagged along, but dammit, maybe he’d wanted to talk to him. Maybe he’d wanted a shot at trying to get things back to normal, so that the two of them could be alone together without the huge-ass elephant in the room.

Maybe he also wanted to know, somewhat selfishly, exactly what Zoro was feeling about him, for reasons….

But he hadn’t been able to get the mosshead alone, and because of that, he’d headed home irritable, and even after coming back to a beautifully scrawled note from Miss Robin on the kitchen counter, detailing when she’d return from some errands, even after making himself some homemade caramel popcorn, his mood hadn’t improved.

He was alone in the house for the first time in recent memory. He was completely alone, and the fact that he now only needed to leave out one spare cookie tin of popcorn for the others, instead of several, was evidence enough that things had changed.

It was so quiet.

Chopper’s homework wasn’t obscuring the kitchen table. The TV wasn’t on in the living room. There was no distant hammering from Franky, or the sound of the lawn mower outside. Nami’s magazine subscriptions weren’t piled on the edge of the counter, and there wasn’t even music, nor voices of any kind.

It was silent.

And it was lonely, not peaceful.

But this was how things would end. They had to. He’d be alone, and he had to accept that because he so desperately wanted his friends to be happy.

He had to finish what he’d started.

Still, it was a while before he moved, sitting at the counter, munching absently on his popcorn and staring into space, his mind drifting to that moment in the hall with Zoro, the way Zoro’s face had burst into flames at the mention of the word “date,” which had fallen from his own mouth unexpectedly.

Why the fuck had he said that…?

He scowled eventually, unable to figure out a reason, instead pushing up to clean the pot and bowl he’d used.

A few minutes later, with the kitchen tidied, Sanji grabbed his backpack off a chair, where he’d thrown it upon entering the room, and shuffled upstairs, past closed doors concealing empty bedrooms that were still too depressing to look at just yet.

He headed into his and Zoro’s room and was almost comforted to see the idiot’s shit strewn about, the room unchanged despite everything. Zoro’s side still looked like a tornado had hit it, his bed unmade, clothes dumped unceremoniously on the floor.

And there was that glaring line of tape that seemed to shine brightly amidst the clutter, like a laser beam ready to cut the entire room in two.

Sanji stared at it for a long time, hating, now, what it represented, the line of separation that would always exist between him and Zoro.
Maybe this was true. Maybe they were due to separate. But he didn’t want to. Not yet.

Sanji dropped his backpack at the foot of his bed and stooped to rip furiously at that line of tape.

Zoro’s heart was pounding, ready to burst from his chest by the time he made it back to Sunny, slammed his way into the empty house and sprinted up the stairs.

He’d rushed the whole way, hoping he wouldn’t hear someone calling his name on the street as Luffy had, almost scared to look anywhere but right in front of him in case some good fortune smacked him in the face. He didn’t want anyone from his past chasing after him. Even if Sanji had killed him off in the game, he wasn’t going to fucking let it take effect.

He didn’t want it to. Not yet.

The roads had changed on him, frustratingly enough, without Luffy leading the way, but he’d made it, and by the time he burst into his and Sanji’s bedroom, he was far too panicked to even take pleasure in the way the blond jumped about ten feet in surprise when he practically kicked down the door.

“Jeez, can you knock first, mosshead?” Sanji yelped, a hand shooting to his chest. “What the hell are you---?”

He trailed off, particularly when Zoro’s eyes instantly fell on the rather large ball of blue tape he had wadded in his hand, his gaze darting to the clear floor, to the slightly cleaner strip of carpet where the tape had been that was the only subtle indication a barrier had ever existed.

Zoro couldn’t focus on it for long, however.

“What’s wrong…?” Sanji was asking warily, sensing how shaken Zoro still was, his harsh pants yet to cease.

Zoro forced himself to focus, to keep himself rooted to where he stood instead of crossing over to freaking hug the guy simply for removing the tape. Somehow that act had unraveled his entire set of convictions.

“Did you play the game?” he eventually managed to stammer, already mentally preparing himself for Sanji’s quick firing of excuses and justifications that was surely about to come.

Instead, Sanji kept staring at him, clenching that ball of tape in his hand, and he shook his head. “No….I haven’t touched it…. Why…”

Immediately, Zoro’s brow furrowed, everything he’d worked himself up for vanishing in the split second he sensed Sanji’s sincerity and confusion.

“Luffy’s outta here…” he said slowly. Nothing was decided yet, but he knew it would be the truth. “We ran into his brothers on the GLU campus…”

“What…?” Sanji balked, voice shrinking. “But I didn’t do anything…”

Zoro believed him. He absolutely believed him now, and there his hand went, itching to reach out for Sanji, seeing him standing there so damn helplessly.

He swallowed hard.

Sanji’s answer didn’t make sense, and it forced a new question into his mind.
“Have things ever….happened like this before?” Zoro asked, a little fearfully. Maybe there was more Sanji wasn’t telling him. “I know the game deleted Usopp and Franky….but I mean….randomly. Before you even play---”

“You kissed me.”

Zoro’s inklng of fear morphed into full-blown terror suddenly and perhaps irrationally. His heart clenched in his chest, hearing Sanji bring up, for the first time since, the very thing that had been haunting him for the past week. The thing that filled his mind every time he so much as thought about Sanji, and the thing that he’d assumed Sanji wanted to ignore entirely.

The stunned look that came over Zoro’s face, the color almost instantly dusting his cheeks and nose….Sanji felt a strangely warm, but nervous tightening in his chest. He forced himself to stand his ground and continue.

“I...had the option to go romantic with your character,” he admitted, pulling arms around himself as his confidence slipped. “But I didn’t. Then you kissed me anyway.”

Zoro’s face fell as soon as the words left Sanji’s mouth, eyes immediately averting. A hard swallow made his Adam’s apple bob, and the look on his face when he nodded was so defeated, just as it had been right after the kiss. When Sanji hadn’t known how the hell to react because things were happening to him, and they were happening fast.

And just as he had then, Sanji couldn’t bear to see that look come over Zoro’s features. Not Zoro, who should never look that way.

He quickly crossed the room to him, grabbed Zoro’s arm and jostled him until their eyes met. He stood close, unconsciously, close enough that he felt the breath Zoro sucked in against his own chest.

Coming back to himself, Sanji retreated a tentative step, though he kept hold of Zoro’s arm.

“Because I didn’t want to take away your free will, Zoro,” he insisted, trying to keep his voice fierce and sincere when it desperately tried to waver under the way Zoro’s eyes stared back at him. “I didn’t want to----to force you into anything in real life. I had no idea you….you actually…”

He trailed off, terrified and rendered speechless by those dark eyes, which watched him with such uncertain longing. It was scary to think that Zoro looked exactly the way he felt…

All his earlier convictions of confronting whatever the fuck this was began to trickle away from him as his throat dried and his heart continued its fast, powerful thud.

Zoro wasn’t answering him and the silence was quickly becoming awkward, so Sanji stammered, “I-I don’t….know what to….”

He couldn’t even finish, just went quiet and shrugged helplessly, wishing he could just talk about this, work this out and fucking act his age.

But that was just it. He’d never had this before, never had someone actually like him, never expected in a million years for that person to be a guy. To be Zoro….

He wished desperately for the mosshead to just read his mind, figure out for himself that Sanji was just as lost as him, for once.

But he didn’t. In fact, he changed the subject entirely, in a voice that was dull and resigned.
“You should check the game,” Zoro said.

This request brought with it a whole new set of fears that Sanji didn’t want to confront, but they were apparently ones Zoro preferred to face, so he gave in and nodded reluctantly, gaze downcast.

Zoro nodded too, but stayed where he was, and it wasn’t until a few moments later that Sanji realized his hand was still holding Zoro’s upper arm, the feel of Zoro’s skin making his palm tingle as soon as he noticed.

He pulled his hand away hastily and backed off, crossing to his bed where he plopped down and leaned over his pillow to take his 3DS off his desk, tossing the wad of tape there absently in its place.

Zoro didn’t move the whole time, his arm searing as if Sanji’s touch had never left and his handprint was burning its way into his skin.

There was no longer a line bisecting the room, no longer that barrier between them, but it was as if a physical wall remained, one he couldn’t breach. So he stood in place by the door, watching as Sanji tapped buttons, brow drawn tight as he stared intently at the screen.

“He’s still here,” the blond finally muttered, sounding confused. “Luffy’s still in the roster. Maybe it’s not….set in stone yet….with his brothers.”

Zoro just quirked a brow expectantly. They both knew what needed to be done, after all. The deed had to be finalized.

Sanji met his gaze, and the look lingered, long enough that Sanji huffed out a breath.

“Don’t just stand there,” he mumbled, and motioned Zoro over to join him with an attempt at his usual irritation.

For a moment, Zoro looked surprised, but he eventually shuffled over to the bed, slowly lowering himself down a few feet from the blond.

But Sanji yanked him closer by the arm, scooting over himself.

And then, shyly, almost experimentally, he leaned more of his weight against Zoro’s shoulder.

He didn’t look at Zoro, even when he felt the other teen staring at him, most likely with a dumb look of shock. Sanji ignored it, determined to see how this felt, even shoving an arm beneath Zoro’s so he could link them as he picked up his 3DS once more.

Zoro’s breaths shuddered close to his ear, and his skin was hot.

But if Sanji was going to kill off Luffy, send away their last remaining friend, aside from their caretaker, he wanted Zoro right there by his side.

Because it was really starting to feel like that was how it should be.

Sir Shannik’s ship is empty.

There wasn’t a soul in sight when the four of them rowed out to it, having found an old, but usable, dinghy. The decks were empty, silent, save for the creaking and soft, weary sighing of the ship’s wooden structure.

It was empty and quiet, and yet, the signs of a struggle permeated through every surface, rooms torn
apart, ropes in disarray, broken boards jutting out at sharp, ragged angles.

The wheel was in shambles.

And blood quite obviously stained the deck.

And yet, the ship still bobs there quietly, the ocean calm and lapping gently at the hull, despite the abandoned wreckage aboard and what Sanjius and his companions now fear may lie beneath the sea’s surface. A watery graveyard, and Luffient especially cannot understand how this has happened.

Even now, hours later, the ship remains alone, a darkening shape against a swarm of tumultuous gray clouds forming along the horizon. They plunge the afternoon sky into a pseudo-twilight that affects Sanjius’ mood as he stands watch from the doorway of a fisherman’s cottage they’ve taken refuge in by the docks. The cottage, much like Sir Shannik’s ship, is broken and destroyed, just as empty and lonely, a mere warped shadow of the home it once was.

Robisia has sought privacy in another room, her grief and exhaustion catching up to her. Though Sanjius feels he should comfort her, he respects her desire to be alone.

Sanjius can hear, through the shattered windows, Zorin and Luffient’s voices speaking outside by the road, around the corner of the small house, the two of them on the look-out for the return of any of Shannik’s crew, though it’s surely a fruitless watch, they know.

Sanjius selfishly wishes he could be with Zorin, particularly after what he’s learned from the man, after their moment of connection at the docks, but he knows the younger knight needs Zorin’s calm support just as much.

And it’s also selfish, and foolish perhaps, this plan that he and Zorin have to steal away to the castle alone, but what else is there to do? They cannot stay hidden for the rest of their days. It’s his duty as the prince to now confront what he must, even if it’s a futile battle. If he is to die, he refuses to do so idly.

If he is to die, he refuses to let Zorin go first.

And therein lies the very major change that’s occurred. The fact that there is no longer a line of separation between the two of them, Sanjius himself having torn it away. The fact that letting Zorin do what was once a mere duty, protecting, is now out of the question if it risks his life.

Sanjius has no idea what to make of this fact, considering it only brings back that strange feeling in his heart that he’d experienced when he was chest to chest with his knight, remembering that vulnerable look on Zorin’s face as he’d recounted his past, how much younger he’d seemed.

He feels lost, emotionally, and it’s terrifying when he needs to be focused.

Sanjius knocks his forehead against the charred door frame, closing his eyes against the sight of Sir Shannik’s ship and the oncoming storm.

The chiming of the church bell rings three resilient times in the distance.

The streets darken as the afternoon sinks to evening, the four of them using the lull to rest, help themselves to a small storage of forgotten bread and cheese that they find inside the cottage’s small kitchen, inside a metal box that was protected from much of the destruction of the house around it.
It’s meager and it doesn’t help their moods improve, but starving as they were, it’s something.

Sanjius wills away dark thoughts that it may be his last meal, his last interaction with his remaining friends, his last everything.

They eat, Robisia using her magic to provide a soft glowing orb of light that floats in the middle of their small circle, and when they finish, Sanjius can’t bear to say any sort of goodbye, so he steps outside again, stands and gazes at the glimpse of the castle he can see, lit, looming like an angry fortress above the shorter, dark townhouses.

It’s no longer the beautiful, welcome sight Sanjius remembers, the angelic sculptures now like gargoyles and the elegant towers and turrets like jagged points silhouetted against the black sky.

As with the town, it no longer looks like home, and it’s both saddening and infuriating to the prince, who pulls his cloak hood over his head to shield against the patter of raindrops that’s started, slicking the cobbled streets.

He doesn’t know how long he’s stayed there until Robisia’s light inside the cottage goes out, and, a few minutes later, Zorin slides up beside him, silent, but strong in his presence, a tiger in the night.

He says nothing, merely takes hold of Sanjius’ elbow and guides him to start walking, quickly, picking up speed to a jog once they’re far enough from the cottage.

Sanjius understands. They’re going now. They’re going before Luffient or Robisia can stop them, getting a headstart at least before their friends notice they’re gone and inevitably come after them.

They follow the outskirts of the town, the trek longer than Sanjius ever realized, always having the convenience of a horse, and though Zorin leads the way, through small alleys and backstreets that Sanjius has never seen before, he makes sure to keep the glowing castle in sight, that speckling of orange above the blue streets. Like the sunset over the sea, Sanjius realizes, and something about this thought clenches the prince’s heart.

This is all wrong. He shouldn’t be sneaking stealthily to his own castle. He shouldn’t be a refugee in his own kingdom, terrible memories of a dank dungeon, an iron mask, quickly resurfacing the closer they get, as they climb the steepening hills beside ruined houses that somehow manage to stand straight along the sloping streets.

Until, finally, there they are, moths drawn to the light, before the ornate gates that stand sentinel at the entrance to the castle grounds, a vast plateau of green that sits atop the wide clifftop. It’s untouched by the destruction they’ve seen in the town, and that mere discovery is disgusting.

It’s clear what these invaders cared about. The wealth and splendor of the palace. Not his kingdom’s true worth, its people.

“The stables, I was thinking....” Zorin suddenly murmurs, and despite the prince knowing he’s been walking with him, feeling his hand on his arm for most of their journey, his knight’s presence brings him back from a faraway place, transfixed by the sight of his now imposing former home.

He turns to look at the knight, Zorin’s hair wet from the rain, a flicker of still-distant lightning silhouetting his head for a moment in a halo of light.

“If we go around back, we can enter through the servant’s quarters,” Zorin continues quietly. “If Patriz and Carneades are alright, they can help us.”

Sanjius watches Zorin’s face, the determination, how hardened his gaze is, one hand still holding
onto him, but the other poised over the hilts of his swords as always.

The rain has begun to lash harder, both of them thoroughly soaked to the bone by this point, but Zorin stands there, not a shiver in sight, nothing but strength and power, staring at him so fiercely and protectively that it takes the prince’s breath away.

And Sanjius knows, in a crashing moment.

He’s not sure what it is, but he knows there’s something missing between them. Something unspoken and unexplored, and it prompts him to breathe his next words over the howl of the wind and the continuous slap of falling water against the streets.

“I’m sorry, Zorin…”

His voice is quiet, but Zorin seems to hear him loud and clear, his brows instantly furrowing in concern and maybe the first glimmer of fear he’s seen in the man.

But Zorin shouldn’t be afraid because they’re stronger together, and the fact that the prince has only just realized this recently is cause enough for regret.

Sanjius shakes his head slightly and chuckles, almost euphoric in spite of the impending doom they might very well face.

“Perhaps in another life, things could have been different,” he muses, turning towards Zorin fully and placing hands on both his arms, a strange, accepting smile still on his face.

Zorin continues to look thoroughly baffled, squinting at him through the rain, eyelashes wet as water drips into his eyes.

Sanjius feels rivulets running down his own face, an imitation of tears, but he suddenly feels calm, even after the emotional tumult this long day has wrought. He suddenly feels as if this is out of his hands, and that it’s best to give himself up to that. To fight and do what he can, and to accept whatever comes his way. It’s a somewhat helpless feeling, but it’s also liberating.

None of this is his fault. None of this was ever within his control. And though he still despairs for the fate of his friends, he can’t blame himself and his own uncertainty. They never expected him to be able to do everything on his own, and that’s why they’ve stuck with him through it all, why Zorin stands here before him, drenched, but refusing to leave.

“You mean the war…” Zorin mutters in response, but it’s unsure, confused eyes fixated on the blond.

Sanjius shrugs.

“The war…” he murmurs back, and before he can stop it, his hand sneaks up, touching Zorin’s hair, brushing wet, dark green clumps off his forehead, trailing his tender touch down his knight’s jaw, trying to convey his newfound appreciation for the man.

“Everything…” he finishes pointedly.

Zorin’s breaths come heavily, the knight nearly flinching under his touch for a moment, eyes not leaving the prince’s.

But then, a flash of what Sanjius hopes is understanding comes over his face, as quickly as the lightning in the sky, and he closes those eyes, lifting hands to take hold of both of the blond’s, lacing
their fingers tightly.

He steps closer and nods so fervently that Sanjius realizes he must understand. He must feel that strange pull between them that they know they can’t answer now, that they may never be able to answer with how their lives are, the times they live in.

They may not even know how to answer it, but one thing is certain.

“I’m with you,” Zorin says, implores, lifting eyes to the prince’s yet again beneath another rumble of ferocious thunder.

Sanjius meets that fierce look and smiles, relaxed and truly happy, if for but a fleeting moment.

“I know,” he replies. “You always have been.”

Zorin smiles too, leans forward, almost with relief, to knock his forehead against the blond’s.

And then a single arrow whistles past them, missing Zorin’s ear by a mere inch.

It sails past, embeds itself in a nearby building, where it bursts into strange purple flames, identical to the arrow that took down Brokard.
“SEIZE THE PRINCE!” a voice roars, and the two look up in alarm to see, through the gates, a horde of guards rushing for them, crossbows at the ready, their armor emblazoned with the same pair of sixes that adorns the invading flags hung throughout the streets, the red paint like smeared blood.

Sanjius locks eyes with Zorin one more time. And in almost the same moment, they both grin, a little feral, a little reckless given everything.

Together, they turn to face their fate.

Swords deflect arrows, and legs kick with more brutality than either of them have shown. They fight, if not for vengeance, than for the hope that defeating this enemy will bring about change, restore their kingdom to what it once was so that they may start anew, have a second chance, even if their lives have been permanently altered.

The town is ablaze once more, burning arrows that have missed their targets setting fire to unsuspecting houses, heat and steam manifesting in the air, even through the torrents of rain that continue, the thunder rumbling ever closer.

The prince and his knight can’t worry about that though, determined to push into the castle, knowing they must take the fight to where it truly belongs, inside the throne room, where the prince must stake his rightful claim.

They’re making a small amount of headway, already crushing through half of the first wave of forces and into the wide courtyard within the castle walls, Sanjius noticing, out of the corner of his eye, Zorin’s blades sending another seven men flying and screaming into an unconscious heap on the wet ground.

It distracts his own opponents enough that he’s able to drop hands to the slick grass, struggling not to slip as he swings his own legs around in a vicious pinwheel that thankfully results in a satisfying cracking of bones and more pained cries from his victims.

He’s able to pause, if only to survey the scene, the dwindling enemies….and the two strange cannon-like shapes he notices parked on either end of the courtyard, shapes that don’t fit in with the line of elegant white mermaid statues that surround the perimeter….

Around them though, flower bushes begin to burst into otherworldly flames, the result of yet more flying arrows, from above this time, the guard towers now very occupied and very prepared to take them out.

The rain of arrows continues to shower down, almost as powerful as the actual raging storm, and Sanjius whips his head around in his first glimmer of panic when he hears a heavy creak.

At the top of the marble staircase leading to the castle’s grand entrance, the massive wooden doors open, shedding a bright rectangle of light onto the battlefield below, a spotlight through which come reinforcements, another swarm of foot soldiers.

They sprint out, weapons at the ready, and Sanjius has no choice but to right himself, scramble forward as well, bumping shoulders with Zorin as the two of them run in tandem down the stone walkway, between the two fountain ponds whose graceful arcs of water seem to mimic the falling arrows curving down.

They race towards the enemy together, until, seconds from clashing, suddenly, a powerful cry behind them, a voice they know and one they, of course, assumed would arrive.
The sound of a fist cracking against skin, a bright purple light illuminating the entire courtyard briefly….and then a collision of rubble, more shouts and cries of agony.

The prince looks to Zorin, who’s already grinning at him around the white hilt of his best sword in his mouth, teeth flashing, brilliant and confident.

“You and Zorin are stupid, Sanjius!” Luffient calls from behind them, and they don’t even need to turn around because, a second later, the knight yells, “Keep going!”

It’s all they need to hear before an enormous burst of Robisia’s strongest magic causes the soldiers before them to shriek, shield their eyes and duck from the sudden blinding light, affording Sanjius and Zorin enough of an opening to rush through them, down the remaining length of the courtyard.

They run up the marble steps, splashing in puddles, Luffient’s battle cries and Robisia’s magic spurring them onward into the entrance hall of the castle, that expanse of blue carpet that spreads out before them in the cavernous space, warmly lit and falsely welcoming.

They make it but a few steps inside before Sanjius narrows in, heart pounding, on an arrow, notched and ready, the bow drawn tight by the strong arms of a massive man standing opposite them, in front of the throne room doors.

Sanjius vaguely registers the sound of running footsteps ascending the stairs behind them, soldiers not yet apprehended by their friends.

But he can’t care, suddenly, everything zeroing in on that poised arrow, which he now sees is dripping a dark stain into the carpet with a strange iridescent liquid.

And it’s his father holding that bow. He knows this, remembers seeing that nightmarish face from behind bars, baring teeth maliciously as he forced an iron mask over his own child’s face, looked Sanjius straight in the eye as he snapped the key in half.

Memories long suppressed come flooding back, and he can’t move, even as Zorin shoves his way in front of him, blocking him from the arrow’s path. He can’t protest, can’t do anything, save for stare, eyes wide and fixated with the trauma of a child abused.

Still, the second his father fires that arrow at Zorin, he reacts. Through his fear, shock, and panic, he reacts.

He pushes his way past Zorin, shoves his knight aside…

…and feels the blade of that arrow pierce his side, a dull puncture that has him grunting and crumbling to his knees, hands trembling around the stick that now protrudes from his gut.

Zorin’s cry of denial and rage is distant in his ears, the rush of his own blood nearly deafening, his eyes staring, blank and almost confused, at the floor before him.

In his blurry peripheral, he thinks he sees Zorin’s form rush forward towards his father.

He wants to scream for him to stop.

But then, the faint sound of another arrow notching, and a deep voice.

“Advance further and I’ll kill him.”

Zorin’s bootsteps stop.
The voice again.

“Take him to the dungeon.”

Suddenly, Sanjius realizes his torso is on fire, burning with pain that feels like it’s ripping his insides apart, clenching at his lungs hard enough to make him cough, blood coming up with it, filling his throat and spilling from his lips.

He feels rough hands on him, one yanking the arrow out from his side, others starting to drag him across the carpet, a trail of blood following.

“SANJIUS!”

A panicked cry behind him......from Luffient...?

A second desperate cry.

“Your Highness!”

Robisia...?

He hears Zorin, definitely Zorin, bellow, “NO!”, just as a blast of heat and flame explodes outside the entrance hall doors.

Sanjius’ vision wavers, body growing limp in the arms of the men dragging him.

The last thing he truly sees is his father’s menacing grin.

But the last thing he imagines is Zorin’s smile.

The world goes black.

Sanji shut his 3DS in a panic, just as the screen changed back to the world map, his tiny avatar bouncing over the castle, and his heart jumping into his throat at the sight of two less members of his army in his roster. Two less members, and his own character’s health halfway depleted after taking that arrow.

Not to mention the fact that he’d just witnessed his own father appearing in the game, dressed in heavy armor, his blond hair and mustache bushy and wild, his sneer just as evil as Sanji remembered from his childhood.

That had not been in the plan. He’d set out to get rid of Luffy alone, and yet, the enemies had escalated beyond his imagination. He hadn’t noticed the flamethrowers positioned within the castle grounds, triggered when he brought both Luffy and Robin forward from the far reaches of the battlefield, placing them in exactly the wrong positions on the grid, directly within the huge weapons’ line of fire.

Now, only he and Zoro remained, and his grip on Zoro’s arm grew tighter for that very fact.

“I didn’t mean to!” he blurted out, hurriedly pushing the 3DS aside on the mattress, as if it were cursed, both hands coming right back to clutch Zoro’s bicep a second later. “I couldn’t—Robin was--I didn’t mean to kill her too! And that arrow---I----!”

Zoro’s breaths were heavy, and his brow was furrowed, for once less focused on Sanji’s touch and more on what he’d just witnessed.
He’d been right there, after all. He’d heard Sanji’s frantic curses, his button mashing, even barked his own combat orders. But watching those flames erase both Luffy and Robin’s near full health in one blow, watching Sanji be shot and captured, his avatar disappearing into the castle with the swarm of guards….it was obvious the enemies had leveled up. And this worried him immensely.

They were alone. He and Sanji. Alone in that world, and alone in the house in real life. With Robin gone, they couldn’t stay here alone. There was no way anyone would let them, underage as they were.

He needed to give Sanji his way out, and fast.

But there was no way he could manage it now, not when the blond was still clinging to him, stressing over what to do, worrying that things would change if they kept their promise of inaction.

“I mean if---if Miss Robin leaves, what’s---I mean, we’ll get someone new here, right?” he was babbling nervously, running trembling fingers back through his hair and staring hard at a point on the floor. “’Cause I can’t---I’m not going back into the system. Fuck that. This is our home, and I don’t fucking care if---I’m the only one here. I’ll fucking deal with it, I just---”

Zoro’s eyes widened, realizing what Sanji was implying yet again, and his face twisted into an angry grimace, the other teen shifting to grab both of Sanji’s arms and give him a shake.

“Stop. Stop,” he growled, shaking him again until Sanji looked up at him, expression a mixture of anxiety and irritation.

And yet, he stared right back at Zoro unflinchingly, blue eyes locking onto his and not leaving, clearly ready to listen to whatever he had to say.

Zoro had to disguise the shudder that ran through his chest, quiet the breath that wanted to huff out of him, and force his eyes to remain where they were, instead of drifting down to his lips.

He allowed himself one indulgence, and one indulgence only, tentatively removing his hands from Sanji’s arms and lifting them to rest on his jaw, thumbs delicately touching his cheeks as lightly as possible.

Sanji inhaled sharply, but he didn’t move, even though his heart was pounding, terrified and exhilarated all at once. He didn’t know what Zoro was going to do, but he decided, in that moment, that he wasn’t going to shy away from it. He was going to face it, with the courage he should have displayed earlier.

He hadn’t realized he’d lifted his hands to hold Zoro’s wrists gently until it was too late.

Across from him, Zoro swallowed, one eyebrow twitching slightly as if preparing himself for something.

Then he murmured, voice low, “If you touch that game again, Curly. I will kill you. In real life.”

And despite the tension of the moment, despite Zoro’s hands on his face, and his body so heart-thumpingly close and every confusing and heartbreaking thing Sanji was feeling in that moment…. He laughed.

Right in Zoro’s face.

But it was a relaxed sound, and it brought with it a sudden playfulness he hadn’t felt in some time,
with the growing burden of the game and the heartache of their friends leaving the house.

He reached up to remove Zoro’s hands from his cheeks, instead bringing his own to Zoro’s face in similar fashion, something that instantly had the other teen stiffen, the scowl he’d adopted in response to Sanji’s laughter quickly snapping into astonishment.

Sanji leaned in closer as Zoro had, smirk remaining on his features, and it wasn’t nearly as scary or awkward as he’d expected, initiating contact, pushing boundaries himself. It was surprisingly easy, particularly under the guise of teasing, when he had the upper hand.

He looked Zoro in the eye and mimicked his friend’s low, challenging tone.

“Like you even could,” he said, and burst into snickers again when Zoro’s familiar unintelligible offended noises started up.

Sanji let him go, fingers feeling warm where they’d touched Zoro’s cheek, and a lightness in his chest that hadn’t been there all day.

Saying goodbye to Luffy several days later was exceptionally more difficult for Zoro and Sanji than it had been for any of their other friends, even Chopper for Zoro. It was exceptionally more difficult, to essentially lose their leader, and yet it was easier at the same time because there were no tears.

Luffy was absolutely ecstatic, his energy a complete whirlwind of blabbering excitement throughout his packing. He was going to live with Dadan and his brothers out of state. He’d be attending a new school in a new city, hours away, but it was an adventure and that was perhaps the best thing for him.

Shanks had come to bid farewell too, him and his crew, sans Yasopp, leaving for another long fishing trip up north. He’d gifted Luffy with a funny, worn straw hat with a red band before he’d left, a hat that was a little too big for the kid, but still managed to look entirely fitting.

And when a social worker had arrived at Sunny, a kind, good-humored woman named Ms. Makino, it hadn’t even been sad because Ace and Sabo were behind her car in that flaming orange Jeep, music blaring, bass thumping, and huge smiles on their faces, ready for a road trip. Ms. Makino was required to supervise Luffy’s transfer, but she’d even agreed to let Luffy ride with his brothers on the drive to Dadan’s.

It had been less a goodbye, and more of a ‘see you later’, as normal as if Luffy were heading out for a bike ride.

Still, the hugs had been tight and meaningful, conveying all unspoken emotions, and the promises had been strong that there would be a ‘later’. They’d see each other again.

When Luffy had bounded off to the Jeep after tossing his things in the trunk haphazardly, Zoro and Sanji both had content smirks on their faces, and Robin, standing with a hand on each of their shoulders, couldn’t help but smile and wave as well.

What was strange was the slightly sympathetic look Ms. Makino gave the two remaining boys as she walked back to her car. What was strange was the way Miss Robin slid her hands lower over their chests, holding onto them a little tighter as she watched the two cars drive off, Ace’s music retreating with them.

What was strange was the instant dip in mood that bore down on the remaining three as they lingered on the front porch of Sunny, the house suddenly feeling empty, like a ship without its captain.
All of them sensed it. There was something left unsaid, and it was certainly something important.

Both Zoro and Sanji thought they knew what it was.

Robin was still here.

Over the days since her in-game death, nothing had happened. She had made no mention of any good fortune. There had been no phone calls, no unexpected visits. Just her presence as normal, if slightly more melancholy, though whether that was due to Luffy’s leaving was uncertain. She hadn’t been at Sunny when she’d died in the game. Anything could have happened then.

The urge to check the game had been strong, at least on Sanji’s part, but he’d refrained. He’d refrained because of Zoro, because of the looks he would give him, and the way he seemed to forget everything in the world but Zoro whenever he looked at him, something that was starting to become an issue in his day-to-day life.

But the question still remained. Why had nothing happened for Robin?

It was both comforting, to have her here, and saddening.

Robin was quiet, standing there with them, but it was a heavy silence, the air thick with how obviously her mind was whirring, despite saying nothing.

They didn’t move, let her stand there until she was ready to speak, and when she did, her tone was quiet but unreadable.

“Sanji, Zoro,” she said. “There’s something I must speak with you about. If you’ll join me inside?”

“Hmm?” Sanji answered immediately, feigning innocence and curiosity, though his stomach had instantly tensed with worry at her words. “Yeah, sure!”

Zoro said nothing, just turned his head to look at Sanji slowly, seeing that fake smile.

Robin nodded, squeezed their shoulders, then released them to turn towards the door, gently nudging them towards it.

They entered the house as if it was prepared to swallow them whole.

Sanji sat with Zoro on the living room couch, a smile on his face until Robin left the room to get drinks. He’d let her when she offered, because it sounded like she was seeking a small delay to prepare herself for whatever she had to say.

As soon as she disappeared into the kitchen, Sanji practically leaped at Zoro, swiveling to grab his arm and hand boldly. The frequency of his touches continued to increase, enough that Zoro had even dared to initiate more of his own, but Sanji usually kept to himself when Robin was in such close proximity.

But clearly his eagerness overrode any embarrassment he might have had.

“Something happened to her,” he whispered. “It had to. She hasn’t said anything, but she’s been acting way more mysterious than usual since Friday.”

“Yes, but don’t you think this feels bad?” Zoro whispered back. “She doesn’t seem that happy. If it was something good she would’ve said something right away.”
Sanji let out a breath, turning his head to look back towards the kitchen, where the sounds of clinking glasses could be heard. He brought himself back to face Zoro.

“What, so you think something bad happened instead?” he hissed. “I mean, she hasn’t left. Nothing’s changed apart from Luffy leaving. What could it---?”

The clicking of Robin’s heels against the tiled floor of the kitchen dulled when she crossed onto the carpet. To their mild surprise, she stepped out of her heels and crossed the room in her bare feet casually.

To their great surprise, she carried with her two glasses of red wine and a bottle of beer.

Stunned, the two boys gaped at the beverages for longer than they should, Sanji forgetting entirely that he still held tightly to Zoro’s arm.

If she noticed, she said nothing, merely set the drinks down on the coffee table between them and settled herself on the perpendicular length of the L-shaped couch.

And if Sanji noticed, he did nothing, not removing his grip from Zoro, even when he focused his attention on her.

Zoro couldn’t even react to the alcohol either, but rather, his mind took him instantly to what it must mean. The last time Robin had willingly allowed him alcohol, it had followed some pretty bad news.

Neither of them moved to take a drink, both watching Robin almost fearfully now as her fingers worked to smooth out her unwrinkled floral skirt. Stalling, again.

She didn’t react to Zoro and Sanji’s worry, which she must have sensed, merely lifted her head to look at them calmly after a minute, voice level when she spoke.

“Several days ago, I received some news,” she said. “However, I wanted to wait to inform you until after Luffy’s departure.”

Sanji’s hand clenched harder on top of Zoro’s, enough that Zoro elbowed him lightly and sent him a pointed look that clearly said, ‘Relax,’ even if his own heart had begun to race in anticipation too.

Robin’s features were solemn, almost as if she were about to inform them of a real death rather than the answers she finally supplied a moment later.

“I’ve received an offer from the Ohara Foundation, an education-based charity organization,” she explained gravely. “They have afforded me the opportunity to work at an orphanage in Cambodia. I had applied for such an opportunity before I came here, but was put on a waiting list….until now…."

Her tone harbored no joy or happiness, none of the emotions that should have accompanied such a statement. She watched them with eyes that were sad, if Zoro had to decipher that strange gaze.

He was aware of Sanji’s shaky inhale beside him, one that seemed stuck between relieved and confused over Robin’s off mood as well.

“That’s--- That’s amazing, Miss Robin!” said the blond, his tone mirroring his confusion, positive, but somewhat forced, as it had been earlier on the front porch. “You’ve always wanted to travel! And Cambodia is---don’t they have all kinds of awesome---temples and things? That’s right up your alley!”

Zoro nearly scowled, seriously wishing Sanji would cut the stupid bullshit with her for once,
particularly when she merely drew lips into a tight line, an attempt at a smile with none of her usual warmth, and replied, “Yes. It is, isn’t it…”

“You don’t seem happy,” Zoro cut in bluntly, deciding he wanted the fucking truth already before his heart burst from his chest.

Something was wrong, and Sanji could sense it, he knew. But if he wouldn’t try and figure out what, then he’d have to take matters into his own hands.

Robin’s expression faltered, lips turning down instantly, and her previously measured breaths started to come a little more unsteadily.

“I’m sorry,” she eventually murmured, shoulders slumping in defeat. “I had hoped this wouldn’t happen, but---”

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly, her blue eyes eventually sharpening.

Sanji’s white-knuckle grip nearly broke Zoro’s hand.

“If I go, the two of you will be moved to separate homes….”

In the silence that followed, there were surely a few heartbeats lost, a sudden numbing panic coming over both boys. It manifested in the trembling of Sanji’s fingers and the difficulty Zoro had taking another breath.

The two sat there, staring at Robin in disbelief and dread over what they’d just been told.

“I tried….” Robin continued quietly. “Franky and I both advocated fiercely for the two of you to be placed together, but…”

She trailed off, shaking her head regretfully.

Sanji’s head felt fuzzy. He could hardly think straight beyond the fact that it was happening. The time had come and he was actually face-to-face with the very real possibility of losing Zoro. It was happening, and he didn’t want it to. In fact, the thought of losing him had already begun its slow assault on his psyche, the blond suddenly unsure of how he’d manage alone, in a strange place with strange people.

This was different. This was different because he wasn’t in control. Zoro would leave him, but nothing good would happen for him, surely. They’d go their separate ways and Sanji would never stop wondering, worrying if he was okay. Fearing the worst for him, even if he knew Zoro was strong.

When his watery eyes slid slowly to Zoro’s, his mouth agape, he had no idea that behind Zoro’s wide-eyed alarm, the other teen was thinking the exact same things….

And yet, slowly but surely, Zoro’s features sombered, sinking into a look that Sanji mistakenly read as acceptance.

Robin spoke again, murmuring softly, “Please listen,” a hand pressing to Sanji’s shoulder, the only thing able to tear Sanji’s gaze away from Zoro’s in that moment.

“I don’t want you to be separated,” she said, letting her hand trail down to rub up and down Sanji’s arm, an attempt to comfort. “So I’ve decided not to accept.”
It worked. It wiped the distraught expression off Sanji’s face, though his eyes quickly narrowed, and he shook his head.

Despite everything swirling in his mind, every fear and every desire to keep Zoro with him, the words that blurted out of his mouth were contradictory.

“No…..no, Miss Robin, you—you have to take the offer,” he was saying before he knew it, and the strange part was that he meant it. He wanted to stay with Zoro, but he didn’t want that to be at anyone else’s expense, certainly not Robin’s.

She’d wanted this for so long. They all knew it. She’d wanted to travel, see the world, experience other cultures.

“This is your—your dream,” Sanji continued, trying hard to keep the tremble out of his voice. “We’ll be—fine. We can take care of ourselves.”

He sucked in a breath when he felt Zoro’s hand pull out from under his, shyly but resolutely sliding over his to hold on himself.

“Yeah,” came Zoro’s voice, addressing Robin, though his eyes stayed on the blond. “Don’t worry ‘bout us.”

Robin’s hand lifted from Sanji’s arm, shock and a sudden flash of indecision in her eyes. Her hands moved to her slender arms, the woman holding herself self-consciously.

It sparked a question in Sanji’s mind, one that he thought he knew the answer to, but he had to be certain.

“Do you….want to go, Miss Robin?” he asked slowly, a lump in his throat.

It took her a long moment to respond, her usually unreadable demeanor rippling with uncertainty and guilt. Her manicured nails dug into her skin.

“Selfishly, yes,” she finally admitted, voice quiet and gaze downcast. She quickly shook her head though, adding, “But I also want the two of you to—”

“Then do it.”

Robin’s words stuttered to a halt, the older woman’s eyes immediately lifting in sharp surprise at Sanji’s words, slim brows lowering as if to question his sincerity when his own gaze was so watery and there was a tremble to his jaw.

But he swallowed, even tried to force a shaky smile.

“You’ve done so much for us,” Sanji said adamantly. “Do something for yourself.”

The silence that followed was heavy, as was Robin’s sigh a few moments later, but Sanji chose to focus on Zoro’s hand holding his, and not on the emptiness that he knew he’d soon face.

Still, it didn’t make it any easier to hold back tears when Robin shifted closer on the couch. It didn’t stop his heart from leaping into his throat when she reached out to take his face in hands, gently as could be, her fingers brushing at his hair with great care. A bittersweet smile pulled at her lips.

“I love both of you,” and it was the first time her voice had wavered, emotion breaking through her composure. “And I promise I will always be here for the two of you. Please know that. No matter
where I am, I will do whatever I can for you.”

The young cook bit his lip, those tears coming full force, spilling down his cheeks beyond his control. He felt Zoro’s hand squeeze his tighter.

“W-We love you too,” Sanji stuttered, Robin’s thumbs brushing at the tears on his face. “You’ve already done more than enough. We’ll never be able to---to pay you back---”

But he couldn’t finish, couldn’t sit there, with Robin’s motherly touch, and speak, when the thought of losing everything was suddenly real and happening.

He fell forward into Robin’s arms and finally let himself cry as he hadn’t since he was a child, with the same fears from that time in his life coming back full force.

Robin embraced him, her two arms feeling like hundreds with how tightly and protectively she held him, stroking through his hair and murmuring soft comforts in his ear.

She held Sanji, but her own tearful gaze fixed on Zoro, who sat, watching Sanji with helpless devastation.

One of her hands fell to Zoro’s knee, forcing him to look up.

Her expression was somehow knowing, beneath the sorrow, and he felt exposed, as if she knew everything he was thinking, how much it hurt him to see Sanji like this.

As if she knew what he was realizing he had to do…despite his and Sanji’s pact.

He had to save Sanji from this...

Even dinner hadn’t been enough to distract Sanji for long after he’d calmed down. It had stopped him crying like a baby, gave him something to focus on, but preparing a seafood pasta for only three people was nothing, and soon enough, he was back in his room, lying on his bed.

A light rain had started outside, mimicking his own tears, but he forced himself to remain composed, even if his mind wanted to fixate on the terrifying thought of leaving this place that was his home, of being separated from the one who’d so quickly become such a major source of support through all of this, perhaps the only reason he’d been able to let his friends go.

There was no way he could relax, not with his heart pounding as it was in his chest. Even lying prone as he was, it was racing, nervous for things yet unknown and hating the feeling of emptiness that strangely filled him when Zoro entered the room and moved towards his own bed.

He’d followed Sanji, that much was clear. Even if he’d remained silent through most of their meal, he’d stayed in the kitchen while Sanji and Robin had cleaned up, and though he’d waited a few minutes after Sanji mumbled about going to change his clothes, he’d still shown up.

Sanji hadn’t changed his clothes. He lay there in the same outfit he’d worn all day, gray plaid shorts and a dark navy button-down.

And Sanji didn’t like how separate it already felt when Zoro quietly shuffled to his own bed. It was enough that, despite every strange nerve-wracking thing he’d begun to feel about Zoro, he didn’t hesitate, as he once would have, to murmur, “Zoro, c’mere.”

No audible response from the other teen, though he felt his eyes on him, even as his own gaze
remained fixed on the ceiling. He could imagine the stupid way Zoro’s jaw was dropped, fumbling for words that wouldn’t come, and his friend’s nerves were tangible as he slowly, almost warily, made his way over.

Sanji shifted, shuffling closer to the wall to make room, and soon enough, Zoro was on his back beside him, their arms unavoidably touching. If he turned his head, he knew he’d be inches from Zoro’s face.

Neither said a word for a long time, both minds circling furiously around the day’s events, and the undeniable tingling that seared at their skin where they made contact.

Surprisingly, it was Zoro who spoke first, his breathing light and his head turning slowly to look at Sanji.

“Remember when you first came to the house? And you made me riceballs…?” he asked, and even though Zoro’s soft, shy tone set his heart fluttering more than it should have, Sanji couldn’t help but snicker.

“That’s so random, mosshead…” he said, shifting to shoot a smug look at him when Zoro rolled his eyes in response.

Sanji watched him for a long moment, finding a strange fascination with the way his cheeks flushed red, the idiot suddenly unable to meet Sanji’s gaze.

Oddly, he calmed, watching him, even with all the worries, fears, and sadness that were threatening to overtake him. When Zoro tentatively flicked eyes back to him, Sanji didn’t feel the stress of losing him, only the massive presence he now undeniably held.

He smirked a little, deciding to brave it, not looking away.

“I burned them ‘cause I didn’t know how to use the rice cooker, and you yelled at me,” the blond recalled. “Told me they were gross.”

Fuck, he remembered being so offended at the time, but all of it seemed dumb when Zoro returned his smirk.


Immediately, Sanji scoffed through a grin, lifted an elbow to nail him in the chest as punishment with a huffed, “You asshole.”

He relished in the pained grunt he elicited from Zoro, who immediately tried to retaliate with a punch to Sanji’s gut, but the blond quickly flipped to his side, grabbing his pillow and curling around it to protect himself.

“How could he have shitty taste when his main interest was this idiotically fascinating blond?” Sanji thought.

The smile in his voice, the fact that Sanji had actually admitted to a mistake. Not to mention the way his hair fell over his forehead, that glimmer of mischief in his eye that Zoro almost dared to think was flirtatious, though it was, of course, wishful thinking...

How could he have shitty taste when his main interest was this idiotically fascinating blond?

What the fuck was he supposed to do? How the hell was he supposed to deal with leaving Sanji?
Even if it was helping Robin….he remembered the dread in Sanji’s eyes, the devastation, even if he tried desperately to hide it.

He knew how much Sanji feared being alone again…

Zoro wanted nothing more than for Sanji to be safe and happy, something fucking sentimental as hell, but dammit, how could he let him go back into uncertainty? So they’d made a pact not to touch the game. But just thinking about how, not even an hour earlier, those tears had fallen so fast and sorrowfully from the blond as he clung to Robin…

“I’m sorry, Zoro,” Sanji murmured, and Zoro realized he’d turned to his side too, watching Sanji and trying to take in everything about him before he couldn’t anymore.

Thus, Sanji’s words caught him by surprise, particularly when Sanji took a breath and seemed to prepare himself for what he said next.

“I’m sorry I haven’t---been straight with you about what I want.”

He didn’t elaborate further, but Zoro knew exactly what he meant, and it was something that brought a feeling of near exasperation. Sanji didn’t need to justify himself. Zoro already knew where he stood on the matter.

He closed his eyes briefly.

“It’s okay,” Zoro replied with a sigh that tried not to be pained, but Sanji shook his head immediately.

“No, it’s not,” Sanji insisted. “It’s not fair to you.”

But Zoro too was adamant.

“I know you like girls. I’ve always known that. It's okay.”

Sanji gave an unexpectedly frustrated huff, one that was surprisingly defiant despite Zoro speaking what had always been the truth.

The blond flopped himself onto his stomach then, arms still around the pillow that he smushed beneath him. He buried his chin there and stared straight ahead at his bedside table, at the glaring red numbers on his digital clock.

His brow furrowed deeply, and Zoro saw him swallow hard before asking, “When did you realize you…?”

He trailed off. But Zoro got it.

Maybe he should have been glad Sanji was asking these questions, glad he wasn’t ignoring it anymore, even if it was fucking terrifying to talk about. But he’d already been met with Sanji’s rejection, and shouldn’t that have been the worst part?

Embarrassed, Zoro shrugged and flipped onto his back, hoping the ceiling would help him think.

It took him a while to answer, but Sanji didn’t push him.

Eventually, he mumbled, sincere, but self-conscious, “It’s always been you….” and he ran a hand over his face anxiously, refusing to look at the blond.
Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sanji shift his head to look at him, but he tried to ignore it, to pretend like he was only telling himself, rather than the very subject of his thoughts.

“Your smile….your laugh. The way you were with everyone else…. How fucking tough you are,” he continued, rambling, but not knowing what else to say other than his exact feelings.

“It was never really a guy or girl thing. And then when you finally…..I dunno, saw me, it just….I dunno….I shouldn’t have shut you out for so long…but I got scared…”

Sanji watched Zoro trail off and rub over his mouth again, cheeks flushed red, his awkward vulnerability palpable in the air.

It was fascinating, in a way, to hear Zoro expressing things he’d never imagined the stoic teen to feel. Things he realized were incredibly in line with what he himself had begun to feel.

It was never a guy or girl thing…

Why had something like that never occurred to him? Why did that thought comfort him, make his heart clench excitedly, more than anything thus far?

He looked at Zoro, looked at who he was. The suddenly shy idiot beside him who apparently cared about him more than he knew, and always had. Who he now couldn’t imagine not being in his life, despite what Robin had told them was to happen.

The rain pattered softly outside, filling the silence and giving Sanji enough confidence to murmur, “Me too…”

He’d been scared too, still was.

But when Zoro let out a shuddery exhale and finally turned his head to look at him almost desperately, most of that fear faded away.

The two of them stayed there quietly on the bed for a long time, the conversation tapering off until Sanji’s eyelids began to droop along with the sun, the room far more illuminated by the warm orb of the ceiling light that cast soft shadows along the walls.

The rain continued and thunder rumbled in the distance, and that, combined with the relaxing sound of Zoro’s breathing beside him was enough to have him nodding off, particularly when, in his last moments of consciousness, he felt trembling fingers thread in his hair tentatively, brushing it away from his face with tenderness...

He was half awoken some time later by movement beside him and a sudden loss of heat, a dip in the mattress.

Sanji groaned subconsciously in confusion, heavy eyelids blinking open blearily to focus on Zoro, sliding off the bed carefully to stand.

Half asleep still, he slurred out, “Zoro…?”, reaching out a hand to brush over the sheets beside him, still warm from Zoro’s weight.

Zoro’s blurry form shifted to look down at him.

“Yeah?”
“What are you doing?” Sanji muttered, almost whiny, an unspoken urge for Zoro to return.

“Bathroom…” Zoro replied after a moment, leaving Sanji with nothing to say other than, “Oh…”

A long minute passed, and despite the loss of his companion, Sanji felt himself drifting off again, the stress of an emotional day catching up to him.

Zoro’s hand slid over his back, splayed there briefly, then lifted to brush a shy finger at the soft skin behind his ear, ever so gently.

“Go back to sleep,” Zoro murmured, and Sanji closed his eyes, too tired to notice the slight quiver in Zoro’s voice.

A loud clap of thunder jolted him awake again, his heart thumping quickly from the shock.

He lay there for a minute, the storm raging outside.

The room was empty. Zoro was still gone.

Sanji huffed a breath and lifted a hand to scrub at his eyes, pushing up off his stomach to his elbows so he could see the clock on his bedside table.

It wasn’t even eight o’clock, and yet the sky was already a dark, angry gray, bypassing the brilliant sunset entirely. Rain fell past his window in heavy sheets in a way that was no longer relaxing, but furious, as if the weather itself had some sort of vengeance to fulfill.

Sanji sat up entirely, crossing legs under him and finger-combing his hair back into some sort of order, waiting for Zoro to return. From the bathroom, right? He vaguely remembered him saying that…

A few minutes passed….

In fact, a long time passed, and it was long enough that Sanji grew impatient, for what he didn’t know. But he got up off the bed, shuffled across the room and out into the hallway….to find the bathroom door ajar, the room unoccupied and dark.

He frowned, until he noticed the light streaming from Robin’s bedroom, and he moved towards it.

He poked his head in.

“Ah, Sanji~” Robin murmured gently, the woman seated elegantly on the window seat, an open book in her lap, but her gaze turning from the howling weather outside. The lamp beside the window lit her skin like fire.

“Quite the strong storm,” she said, trying to smile, though it was clear, when she saw the stricken confusion on Sanji’s face, that she still harbored a great deal of emotion and concern.

Sanji’s eyes flicked around the room, at every corner of the modern interior, as if Zoro could be hiding beneath the bed’s wrought-iron frame, or behind the almost black finish of Robin’s wooden dresser. That was stupid. He obviously wasn’t in the room.

“Are you alright?” Robin was asking him, shifting legs off the seat and swiveling to face him, setting her book down entirely. A flicker of lightning darkened her silhouette.

“Where’s Zoro?” he blurted out, prompting her to frown slightly.
“I saw him venture downstairs some time ago,” she answered, but that was all he needed to hear.

He turned on his heel, out of the room, scurrying down the stairs, his heart in his throat because he suddenly had a feeling he wouldn’t find him.

And he was right. The entire first floor was empty, and when Sanji shoved his way into the garage and flipped on the light, he found Zoro’s skateboard, but not Usopp’s old bike, the strong wind whistling in the side door beside Robin’s car that remained open a crack, splattering raindrops on the smooth concrete floor.

A panicked whimper left him, his chest tight with dread.

Then he sprinted back into the house and slammed the door, raced through the rooms, up the stairs to their bedroom at the end of the hall.

His breaths came sharply and quickly, the blond practically collapsing to his knees beside his bed, where he reached underneath and yanked out the small bin that held his video games, the bin that was already moved from its original position.

And his eyes immediately filled with tears, lips stretching into a pained grimace as he gritted out, “Fuck!”

He fell forward into the blankets, fists clenching there and a shudder escaping.

“No! Fuck! Why would you---?!"

A clenched sob left him, but he forcibly willed it back, pushing to his feet, tears still streaming. He hurriedly threw on the closest pair of shoes he could locate, Zoro’s old ratty combat boots—a size too big, but it didn’t matter—and raced from the room.

Zoro was gone, along with his 3DS.

And he knew.

He knew exactly what Zoro was going to do…
Zorin is frozen, his eyes on the notched arrow, that bow held perfectly steady in the firm grasp of the imposing man blocking the way to the throne room. The man who has Sanjius’ sun-kissed hair and strong chin, but absolutely none of his warmth, his lips drawn into a grim snarl and eyebrows pulled tight beneath the golden armored helmet he wears over his brow.

Zorin’s eyes follow the slow drip of that purple poison onto the plush carpet, but his ears are tuned to the sound of the crackling fire now burning outside the doors, where, a few mere moments ago, Luffient and Robisia had been fighting their way across the front gardens to join him and the prince.

And now they are gone. Simply gone, in a fateful instant.

The roar and hiss of the flames as the rain pelts them is filling his ears, screaming loud and clear where Luffient’s strong voice had been. Luffient’s voice, which had always reassured him that everything would definitely be fine, that even their small numbers would be enough to win when their kingdom’s future was on the line.

But now his captain’s voice has vanished, suddenly, and though the flames burn tall and thunderous, warming him from behind, the world is quiet and cold, and Zorin has never felt more alone, more terrified than he feels in that moment, not even after losing his sister.

Because not only are Robisia and Luffient gone, not only is that massive silence deafening…

But it is nothing compared to the sound of his Prince’s labored breathing, his boots dragging limply across the floor as two guards drag him from the hall.

And Zorin’s eyes remain fixed on that arrow, watching the fist holding it for any twitch, any sign that the man will release it and hit the prince again.

He hadn’t been able to stop it. Despite everything he’d promised the prince, promised himself...he’d failed.

And he knows he now must do whatever it takes to save him, even if that costs him his own life. Sanjius will surely be livid, but it’s unacceptable, what he’s allowed to happen.

He now has to do whatever it takes. Because if he doesn’t, who will?

He starts to reach for a sword, but his enemy’s piercing glare sharpens and he draws his bow tighter, aiming at the prince with new resolve, enough that Zorin is forced to drop his hand.

He can’t even watch as they take him away, can only flinch at the sound of the heavy doors to the side of the hall slamming, the sound taking with it any proof that Sanjius has not been harmed further. Along with any reason for Zorin to continue to stand idle.

The knight is ready when that notched arrow flies, sword drawn perhaps faster than ever as he quickly slices the arrow in half, sending it falling uselessly to the carpet below, nothing more than a stick.

His enemy quickly draws another, but Zorin is already rushing forward to close the gap between them, knowing long range is where this monster has his advantage.

He is fast, fast enough that the man sees the futility of his arrow and discards his bow to pull a long
broadsword from his side, the polished silver of the blade flickering orange with the firelight licking into the building’s interior.

It fuels Zorin’s rage as much as it’s stripped him of everything, and their blades clash with a high-pitched singing that sounds more like a whine to Zorin’s ears, the prince’s cry of pain yet to fade from his mind.

The man is massive up close, much taller than Zorin, and his bulk has surely intimidated lesser men. But Zorin cannot be intimidated. He can’t even feel any sort of hesitation because the second he does, he could lose what he has left, the most important something, the sole thing his heart beats for now.

“This kingdom is **his!**” Zorin growls up at the man, pushing all his strength against his sword. “He **will** be king and you will **not** take that from him!”

“It’s too late for that,” the man sneers back at him before shoving off Zorin’s weight with another high-pitched scrape of metal.

The two of them dance apart several paces, Zorin taking the opportunity to reach for his other swords at his hip, heavy breaths leaving him even though he’s hardly exerted himself yet. He can’t control it, not knowing the prince is in trouble, not when he knows he must do what the prince can’t right now if he is to save him.

He brings the hilt of his prized sword to his mouth, clamps onto the ornate silver hilt with teeth, and he’s about to draw another when, suddenly, there’s a noise behind him, over the crackle of flames. It’s a soft noise, like the flutter of wings, and in fact, a flash of yellow darts by in his peripheral.

Zorin dares not take his gaze from his enemy, but it seems whatever has arrived has distracted the man, because his focus averts to a small golden bird that now hovers in between them.

Zorin has little time for confusion though before the bird transforms, wings lengthening and feathers dissipating in a shower of marigold ash that fades into the air. Human arms begin to take shape, legs, a torso, and a head of blond hair following quickly after.

And then a man, shorter, and a little stout, stands there in front of Zorin, his back to the knight but his stance powerful as he faces down the man Zorin’s been fighting, his red robe tattered, but regal.

“Jajjius,” he snarls, in a voice that is world-weary and weathered, yet fierce. “You’ve gone too far.”

Jajjius’ lips pull up in a sneer.

“Far enough to drag **His Cowardly Majesty** out of hiding,” he growls back in a mocking tone, following it with a sarcastic bow. “King Zephyr. What an **honor.**”

Zorin’s eyes widen a fraction, a jolt of surprise shooting through his chest.

The King….Sanjius’ grandfather…. Alive…?

But how? Where has he been all these years…?

“Go!”

Zorin looks up to find the king addressing him, his head turned slightly over his shoulder, so that Zorin can see the long blond mustache that juts out below his nose, and the hard lines dragging
through his skin.

“Go after him!” he orders again, and Zorin suddenly realizes that he is here to help, amazingly.

He wastes no time, swords still drawn. The knight turns and sprints for the doors through which the prince disappeared.

Behind him, there is movement, a feral sound coming from Jajjius, and he sees the glow of magic sparkle over the walls, illuminating the shadows of the two men lunging for each other, larger than life.

Zorin’s heart beats frantically as he slashes right through the massive doors on the side of the hall, foregoing doorknobs altogether in favor of crashing into them, sending wood flying in splinters as he stumbles into the hallway beyond.

The corridor is long and dark, illuminated only by ornamental candlestick holders that seem to flicker infinitely in either direction. Portraits of past rulers and royal family members stare him down with judgmental eyes.

Heavy breaths huff out over the hilt of his sword because he has no idea where the dungeon is, can’t even hear anything save for the clanging of a blade in the entrance hall, the grunts and footfalls as the two men clash.

He feels terribly alone, suddenly, alone and lost, but still he runs, using his gut and taking off to his left instinctually.

“I’m coming for you,” he finds himself gritting out, the thunder of his footsteps clapping loudly on the polished wood floor, the candles becoming continuous streaks of light on either side of him as he races. “Please---don’t give up!”

“Don’t do this---don’t---fucking---! Urgh!”

Sanji’s breaths heaved and panted around his words, rain pouring from the sky, soaking his hair and running into his eyes. But still, he ran as fast as he could down the street, jagged lightning flashing in clean lines, illuminating the sky, thunder accompanying close behind.

This was dangerous. This was fucking dangerous, but he didn’t care, could only focus on running, down the street towards the beach because it was the only direction Zoro would go, the only place he really knew to go to. It had to be right. Because if he couldn’t find him….

No, he wouldn’t think of that.

That stubborn idiot, Sanji thought as he sprinted, misty streetlamps the only thing guiding his way past the dark empty houses on their street.

He had to stop him, had to do something before Zoro ruined his own life, all for the sake of Sanji’s.

Zorin reaches a wall, or rather, a window, outside which whips tall, slim grass from the gardens outside, flicking anxiously like the angry tails of cats in the storm still raging outside.

The knight growls, faced, again, with a directional choice, knowing with every second he wastes, the prince could be slipping further away.
He can’t succumb to frustration, though he wants to scream, panicked shudders wracking his body and threatening to rip all control from him in a way he’s never quite felt before. He’s always had people to rely on, but now there is no one but himself.

He is the only one with any chance of saving his prince.

Another second, then he darts right, hoping, just short of praying, for once in his life, that he’s going the right way.

Sanji ran until he hit the sand dunes, faced with that wall of waving grass that parted in several places along the road, providing access paths to the beach beyond. He could hear the roar of the waves, shivered as the wind howled and the rain chilled his skin, already soaking through his shirt and pants easily.

He couldn’t see shit. There was no sign of a bike, no footprints in the sand, nothing, not that there would be with the rain quickly erasing any indentations it wrought.

Why would Zoro be here? Why would Zoro go towards an open space? Why wouldn’t he seek shelter somewhere?

But Sanji couldn’t think logically, knowing Zoro’s directional sense worked in strange ways.

So he made the decision to rush through the nearest corridor of grass, bursting forth onto the beach beyond and taking off once more towards the pier, skirting the low rope fences on the edge of the dunes.

Zoro had always had the mysterious ability to find him easily in times of crisis. Could he do the same for Zoro?

When Zorin finds himself at another dead end, he doesn’t hesitate this time. He wrenches open the heavy metal doors in front of him, discovering a dark, torch-lit set of stairs that spirals down into a winding abyss.

It’s difficult to see, save for one thing. The flicker of the firelight over wet droplets of blood that he now notices are scattered across the floor, on the steps.

His teeth grit down on his sword hard in fear, but down he goes, a hand slamming into the stone wall to catch himself when he nearly trips and tumbles in his haste. Still, he keeps going, spiraling down in dizzying circles until he hears a distant slam that echoes somewhere in the cavernous space.

A slam, and the sound of men’s voices.

His eyes widen.

He doesn’t hear the prince, but it’s something.

He doesn’t stop.

When his feet hit the wooden pier, Sanji’s heart nearly stopped upon seeing Zoro’s discarded bike at the end, thrown haphazardly at the foot of the stairs leading up to the boardwalk above. A wheel spun ominously in the howling wind, and Sanji realized with worry that there was only one way to go now.
His foot hit the first step, cracking in tandem with the thunder above, and he began to power up, palms smacking onto the wood when he nearly slipped in a slick puddle. Trembling limbs pushed him up again quickly.

Breaths panted.

His hair slapped into his eyes and his shirt clung uncomfortably to his torso, but he didn’t care.

It was quiet, save for the storm.

Still, he kept going.

He couldn’t be too late. He couldn’t.

Zorin lands at the foot of the stairs with a loud clatter, giving away his position entirely, but it doesn’t matter. Because what lies before him is a long line of cells, most pitch black, save for a beacon of light towards the end of the corridor, a bright orange circle spotlighting the two guards dragging the prince.

Zorin’s vision narrows, eyes suddenly predatory and vicious.

Feral instinct propels him forward with a bound.

Sanji arrived at the top of the stairs, faced with the dark expanse of the pier stretching out over the ocean before him.

The waves thumped and crashed against the wood beneath his feet, and he even noticed the ghostly spray of water splashing far higher than usual over the railings on either side.

There was nothing in sight….save for the tiny white light he could barely make out at the end of the pier, coming from his 3DS. Lightning flashed and there was Zoro, a huddled silhouette beneath the pagoda of the observation deck.

The breath shuddered out of Sanji and he rushed forward.

The torch, carried by one of the guards, clatters to the ground the instant Zorin’s sword slashes the man’s stomach. It rolls along the dirt floor, flame spinning, and hits the wall, where it continues to burn, forgotten, in the corner.

Similarly, the other guard drops Sanjius, who collapses and lies there on his side, unmoving.

Zorin’s heart nearly rips in two at the sight, but still, he must focus on the guard before him, who has foolishly drawn his sword as his companion coughs up blood and stumbles to the side where he too falls to the floor in a heap.

The man lowers his stance and pulls his blade back in surprisingly good form before pivoting and slashing across in a precise arc.

Zorin counters it easily, blocking with a flick of his wrist and pushing downward, so he can spin himself, his two swords in either hand a fast cyclone aimed to catch the man with a razor sharp slice.

The guard is skilled though. He ducks low to avoid the attack, at the same time lifting his sword
quickly to disrupt the whirl of Zorin’s blades with a loud clang of metal.

Zorin doesn’t have time for this. The prince hasn’t moved since tumbling to the ground, and he can see the blood pooling beneath him.

He’s right there, but he could lose him if this man doesn’t fall.

Zorin swings his swords once more with a vengeance.

The pier was long, longer than Sanji remembered. And he wasn’t sure if it was his imagination or not.

The guard’s blood gushes red when Zorin cuts his throat.

Sanji’s feet squeaked and splashed on the wet boards.

The guard hits the floor with a choked gasp, a violent twitch, and then nothing more.

A wave crashed high, spilling foaming water over the edge of the railing and into Sanji’s path.

Zorin kicks the man’s body aside, stepping right over him to get to the prince.

Sanji fell to his knees, water rushing around his ankles and tears rolling down his cheeks.

Zorin collapses beside the prince, trembling hands reaching out to turn him onto his back as gently as can be.

Why was he so cold, why did it hurt to move even when Zoro was so close? He closed his eyes.

“No... Your Highness,” Zorin murmurs, fingers brushing hair from his face, scanning his still features fearfully. The prince doesn’t move, just lies there with slack lips and skin far too pale. No response to Zorin’s words. Blood slowly seeps across his torso.

“Your Highness---Sanjius!” Zorin growls with panic, shaking his shoulder and then hunching over to take his face in both hands, thumbs stroking desperately. A pathetic whimper threatens to rip from his throat the longer Sanjius doesn’t respond. “Open your eyes. Come on. Please, you can’t---!”
The prince twitches ever so slightly, his chest lifting in a deeper breath that immediately has him cough, the sound wet and choked, but his eyelids flutter and it’s enough. He’s alive.

“Z...Zorin...” he breathes in a tiny weak whisper, even though his eyes have yet to open fully.

His knight huffs out a sigh of relief, entire body shaking, but he leans down without thinking to press his forehead to the prince’s. Closing his eyes for a few moments, he tries to focus himself, let his relief clear his head.

“It’s alright,” he murmurs, not yet moving.

Then he sits up, slipping arms beneath Sanjius’ form to try and get him into his arms.

“Here,” he says. “Hold onto me. I’ll find an apothecary. O-Or a healer. You’ll be fine---come on.”

He’s stammering, words trying to be confident, but failing rather miserably.

Because Sanjius is limp in his arms, slumping against his chest heavily. His blood drips onto the floor.

Zorin’s heart beats madly in his chest beneath the prince’s head, and he struggles to lift him, despite his massive physical strength. Something is weighing him down, and he doesn’t want to accept this growing realization within him…

“You’re strong---you can do this! Please, just---”

He looks down to meet a blurry blue gaze, the prince’s eyes not leaving his for a long, final moment.

“Zo---Zorin...” he breathes, lips turning up in the faintest of smiles. “I-I.....”

“I’m right here---I’m getting you out of here!” Zorin cries, jostling him to keep his attention, voice sounding foreign in its terror. “Don’t give up!”

But the blond is slipping again, his smile slowly fading, eyes closing and his body growing even heavier in Zorin’s arms.

The knight lets out a clenched sob, tears not quite having caught up to the reaction that’s been building in his chest.

He clutches Sanjius tighter, both arms circling him, and holds him close, burying his face in his collar.

“Don’t---” he chokes out, his heart wanting to fight for him, more than anything, but his mind competing, telling him the sneering truth. “Don’t leave---come on---y-you---please---please don’t---”

He feels Sanjius shift minutely. A brush of lips against his jaw.

His tears finally spill out, his hand reaching up to tangle in the prince’s blond hair, supporting his head as it begins to fall back, the breaths barely moving his chest starting to come in short gasps.

Zorin quakes with the burgeoning grief as those breaths come fewer, the moments between stretching longer.

Three small, but important words burst through his own heart, almost a plea, as if they can get the prince to stay, but it’s no use. He can’t get them out in time before a long moment of silence passes.
He waits for the prince to take another breath.

But he never does.

And when Zorin pulls back in horror, the prince’s head lolls, his lips tinted a deathly shade of purple beneath the blood.

He is entirely still.

Everything drains from Zorin in one fell swoop, his anguish, his terror....

Zorin can only stare with a wide-eyed gaze, his own breaths slow and scarce, despite the rapid beat of his heart.

“Sanjius...” he whispers, but there’s nothing.

No reply, not even when his hand slides over his cheek, his chest.

His world cuts to black for an instant, his entire surroundings disappearing for a split second before he finds himself thrust cruelly back into that moment, cradling Sanjius in his arms, completely, truly alone.

He shudders.

Slowly, and with great reverence and care, he uncurls himself from the prince and lays him down, supporting his head gently.

He kneels there, his chest tight and burning, as if a pair of claws has ripped it in two. Still, he kneels there quietly before the prince, looking at him, but trying not to process what he sees, tries not to accept the fact that the prince’s silent stillness is final.

If he ignores the paleness of his skin, his unmoving chest, and the crimson stain seeping through the fabric of his vest, the prince looks regal and peaceful.

His blond hair has begun to dry in soft golden waves, his face no longer contorted in pain, perhaps calmer than he’s seen it in a while, and the blood on his lips actually serves to color them.

Zorin stares at him, and the longer he does, the longer Sanjius doesn’t open his eyes, the harder Zorin’s breaths come, despite his best efforts to stay calm.

But it’s subconscious panic, and he is powerless to stop his body reacting to this horrific loss, not knowing, in that moment, what to do or where he will even go.

The world around him begins to darken again, the edges of his vision swimming in and out of focus, the torches on the wall seeming to flicker into blackness with increasing frequency.

Zorin ignores it and leans over, tenderly bringing hands to the prince’s head, and presses a kiss to his forehead. Lips move to kiss each of his cheeks, and then he finds himself over Sanjius’ lips, close enough that his nose bumps the prince’s.

Zorin hovers there, his breaths huffing between the inch that separates them.

His body trembles, and his vision wavers again, so he closes his eyes, willing Sanjius to respond, willing him to come back, but of course he doesn’t.

There is nothing but a heavy emptiness in the air, and a sudden gust of wind beside him, strong
enough that his eyes snap open and he turns a blurry, exhausted gaze slowly to his left.

He catches a female form suddenly appearing, morphing from the smaller shape of a moth, her long purple cape fluttering out behind her like wings, pointed boots touching down onto the dirt floor beside him.

He can’t react, can only stare blankly as she crouches elegantly, pink hair falling heavily over one blue eye, the other roaming over the prince’s prone form.

Zorin can’t even focus on how much she looks like the prince because his vision again flickers to black, his body feeling numb.

“Move aside,” the woman murmurs, physically pushing him back from the prince and leaning closer herself, her hand shining with the saturated glow of magic.

Zorin staggers back, leaning heavily on a shaky arm.

His eyes are on the prince just before the corners of his vision cave in on him, swallowing the three of them into an impossible black.

The picture on the screen flickered, trembled and shook just like Zoro’s hands holding the 3DS. The keening violins of the background music scratched and jerked to a halt. And then the light from the screen went out entirely, the device shutting off of its own accord.

Calmly, Zoro shut the 3DS, set it down on the picnic table beside him, and leaned forward heavily onto his knees, curling an arm over his head and staring straight out at the waves churning angrily below the pier, the lashes of rain pouring down around the pagoda like a waterfall.

He was freezing, goosebumps prickling over his bare arms, still soaked, and probably not in the safest spot, with lightning flashing far too frequently.

But he didn’t move, just buried his face in the crook of his elbow and, for once, let his tears mix with the rainwater, trying not to think about the disturbing image of essentially Sanji slipping away in his arms.

He didn’t move, not even when he heard a distant cry of his name, heavy footsteps pounding ever closer on the boardwalk behind him.

His chest merely clenched hard, pain ripping through his heart enough to have him clutch at the wet fabric of his T-shirt when he heard the footsteps stop at the end of the pier.

They paused there just for a minute, and then Sanji slowly moved forward and stood before the hunched form perched atop the table, beneath the canopy of the pagoda.

The blond stood there in front of Zoro, his hair plastered to his face, heavy breaths huffing from between lips, and though it was dark, he could see the glisten of wetness on Zoro’s cheeks that didn’t come from the rain.

Zoro stayed there, curled over his knees, hiding his face in his arms, and when his eyes lifted to Sanji’s, there was sadness there, but also a resolute acceptance.

Sanji shivered, staring him down until he finally mustered the courage to ask, “Did you…?”, voice thick in anticipation of Zoro’s answer.
Zoro said nothing, didn’t question how he found him, just looked at him with those slow tear tracks on his face, visible when the lightning lit the sky.

He nodded silently.

Sanji let out a shaky breath, eyes filling with tears too.

Then he stepped forward, unsure what was controlling him in that moment, other than his sorrowful appreciation for Zoro’s sacrifice. What else could he do when Zoro had just given up his own chance at happiness for him?

Sanji climbed onto the picnic table’s bench, settled himself on the tabletop next to Zoro.

He stared at Zoro, who straightened and looked at him with an emotion so intensely powerful that Sanji had to close his eyes for a moment.

“You’re so stupid…” Sanji whispered, and it didn’t matter if Zoro heard him over the wind and waves.

Because a second later, he brought an impulsive hand to Zoro’s face, leaned in, and kissed him with every uncertainty, everything he didn’t understand and yet made so much sense about Zoro. Everything he didn’t think he loved or would ever miss until now.

Maybe the kiss was closed and wet. Maybe he was too nervous or distraught to explain himself or try and work through his lingering confusion just then. But he wanted Zoro to know, even if this was the only time.

He wanted him to know how much he didn’t want to say goodbye….

For a moment, he felt Zoro’s surprise in his sharp inhale, the tremble of his lips, and the way his hands stayed off of him.

But only for a moment before Zoro’s body shuddered with a bittersweet relief, and he fell into Sanji’s kiss, even if he had no idea what he was doing.

He followed his instincts, angled his head, shifted, and pulled Sanji closer with hands threaded in soaked hair, parted his lips and pressed back, the gesture enough to make Sanji whimper against his mouth and tilt into his grasp willingly, amazingly.

It didn’t last long though, couldn’t, not when Sanji pulled away for air and instantly had to clench back a sob, not when Zoro was shaking so badly with nerves and adrenaline.

Tear-filled eyes searched each other’s so desperately, swirling with unanswered questions and worries but unable to get anything out in that moment.

They trusted each other, that much was clear, especially when Sanji’s arms came tightly around Zoro’s shoulders and Zoro’s held him as close as he could manage, turning his head and burying his nose against Sanji’s hair.

They were vulnerable, and scared, and even if Sanji hadn’t kissed him, hadn’t come at all, it wouldn’t have mattered.

Sanji’s life was about to get better, Zoro knew. Even if that meant he wasn’t going to be part of that picture.
They walked back to the house eventually, though the downpour had ceased, leaving only a gentle drizzle, the thunder and lightning growing more and more distant with every passing minute.

They walked in silence, Zoro’s hands stuck firmly to his handlebars, too nervous to initiate anything else, hearts pounding, but the glances they shared were enough, the occasional brush of their arms against each other.

The streets were slick and black, oily mirrors reflecting the streetlights, the sound of the bike tires a smooth crackle through the shallow puddles.

Sunny was a bright beacon of light amongst the empty vacation houses, its windows warm and welcoming as always. And though Robin would surely be worried, though there was a strange car neither recognized parked in the driveway, they were home, and that was all that mattered at that point.

They went through the garage, left the bike, kicked off wet shoes onto the mat beside the door and tromped into the kitchen in their drenched socks, dripping onto the tiles.

They’d barely made it a foot into the door before Robin whisked over to them, a hand at each of their cheeks and fearful concern rippling through her blue eyes.

“Zoro! Sanji! Where were you? Are you alright?” she stammered, uncharacteristically flustered, but for once, Sanji couldn’t focus on her, even despite her worry.

Instead, his eyes fixed on the two figures beyond her, hovering near the kitchen counter.

There was a gruff-looking old man, with a head of graying blond and a long mustache straight out of Sanji’s memories...
Beside him, a young woman jolted upright, arms crossed over her purple rain jacket nervously, dyed hair of a bright pink flopping over one of her wide eyes that were….a startling blue….just...like his….

The woman pushed away from the counter without a second thought, Robin pulling back from the two boys just before the woman reached Sanji and clamped a hand onto his arm, turning him to face her.

She stared at him in disbelief, and Sanji stared back, at the face he hadn’t seen for over six years now, not since he was a young boy, taken from his abusive family and longing to stay with the one person who had been a source of comfort and support.

“…Reiju…?” he murmured to his sister, her eyes still roving his form before they landed on his.

“It really was you…” she breathed, and though he didn’t know what she meant by that, he had little time to think before she yanked him forward into a tight embrace, which he couldn’t help but return.

He was getting her wet, no doubt, but she didn’t seem to care, just held him and chuckled tearfully.

Some of his shock began to wear away after a minute, enough that he actually felt himself smile too, squeezing her tighter and directing his gaze to the man still standing across the room.

“Grandpa,” he huffed, and Reiju pulled back with a grin to ruffle a hand through his hair and look smugly at the old geezer as well.

Zeff smirked fondly, just as he used to.

Beside Sanji, Zoro’s eyes closed, shoulders slumping in acceptance.

He felt Robin’s fingers brush the back of his head consolingly.

“He didn’t believe me. I was positive it was you, but this old guy wouldn’t listen,” Reiju said, jerking a thumb over her shoulder at Zeff, still leaning back against the counter.

“The odds were slim to none, zucchini,” the man shot back matter-of-factly, prompting Reiju to frown at the annoying nickname.

Sanji was seated between Robin and his sister at the kitchen table, hunched over with his hands in his hair, dumbfounded amazement on his features.

“I just can’t believe I didn’t---didn’t notice you!” he croaked, wracking his brain for the moment he’d ridden through Reiju’s college campus weeks ago, on the way to the game store, when he’d nearly barreled into a pedestrian---his sister apparently. “I mean--”

“You were zooming,” Reiju replied, smirking and reaching out to brush back some of her little brother’s damp hair. “I thought for sure you would crash your bike. But it seems you had somewhere important to be. And now you’re going on bike rides in the middle of storms.” She frowned. “Note to self….you’re now a maniac….”

“Shut up…” he muttered, fully reminded of what had just taken place shortly before. His lips still tingled with Zoro’s kiss. He was glad the mosshead had gone to get towels, because his face had exploded into a blush. “That...was…”

“We’ll discuss it later,” Robin interjected gently, her hand on his shoulder, and he shot her a grateful
A sigh, and he ultimately chose to focus on the questions that were still burning inside of him in regards to his family’s arrival.

“How are---what happened?” he stammered, sitting up straighter so he could look across the room at Zeff as well. “How did you find me? And why are you….together?”

Reiju’s lips turned up in a smile, gaze not leaving Sanji, still rather incredulous herself that this moment was happening.

“I’ve been living with Grandpa ever since we left Dad,” she explained. “But I moved to Logue Town to go to GLU.”

Sanji couldn’t help it. An ill-founded jealousy filled his chest. How had she managed to end up with their grandpa, while he’d been thrown into the system? It was stupid, and mean of him. He wanted the best for Reiju, and to hear she’d been fine after they’d been separated was great news. But it still hurt, considering his instability before coming to Sunny, and he couldn’t quite keep his features from twisting into a pout.

“After the bike incident,” his sister continued. “I started doing some serious research about where you were. I went to the social services office downtown to see if they could help. Turns out we’ve been living in the same city for two years, little brother.”

She grinned, and while this fact was rather amazing, Sanji ultimately rounded on Zeff, unable to contain his upset and confusion.

“Why didn’t you---?”

“For your protection,” Zeff countered immediately, as if he’d anticipated Sanji’s question. It had been a long time since they’d seen each other, but Zeff had always seemed to understand Sanji better than anyone, handling his emotional outbursts with skill.

“Your father was still on trial,” he said. “And I was unfortunately still in contact with him. Considering your physical trauma, you were forcibly moved out of state to better facilities, here, apparently, because you were so young. I was able to secure custody of your sister only. It was regrettable, but it seems you’ve fared well here.”

Sanji’s jaw snapped shut, squirming in his seat a bit, jealousy simmering somewhat. The geezer was right. He’d had a fantastic life for the years he’d been here, with people he loved dearly. He’d been lucky to end up where he had….

But that still left another question. Because he and his sister only accounted for two-fifths of their family, after all.

“What about…?” he started to ask, but trailed off, not quite feeling comfortable speaking of the three brothers who had helped make his life such a living hell.

Zeff’s expression, surprisingly, softened some, hardened lines and deep wrinkles smoothing between his eyebrows as he watched the boy.

“They’re living in a group home back in East Blue,” he answered. “They’ve had counseling and support and they’re actually doing quite well---”
“You’ve been to see them…?” Sanji interrupted, bitterness in his tone, enough so that Reiju sighed and Robin squeezed his shoulder.

But Zeff was ready, sternness back in his expression as he grumbled, “Your mother would want me to.”

Any retort Sanji could have had ground to a halt instantly. His mother….

Everything had been fine until her death. It had only been after that his father had spiraled into darkness, taking his brothers with him.

His mother had loved them all with everything she had...

“So why are you here…?” Sanji asked slowly, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath. Knowing what Zoro had done with the game, he had some idea. He needn’t be nervous, but still, his heart had begun a steady pounding in his chest in anticipation of Zeff’s answer.

Zeff seemed satisfied with Sanji’s question, his features relaxing once more.

“Your sister called me out to the city once she found you,” he said. “Today, I secured guardianship. We were due to deliver the news tomorrow, but your sister here insisted we come tonight. Almost had a tree branch go through the windshield in this storm.”

Despite everything, Sanji’s heart skipped a beat, several, in fact.

“Wait…” he stuttered breathlessly, eyes wide, his sister smirking in his peripheral. “I’m gonna live with you? Back in East Blue?”

Zeff’s lips stretched into a full-blown grin beneath his bushy mustache.

“Sure are, eggplant, so get used to it.”

From around the corner in the dark living room, tucked silently behind the door frame, Zoro knocked his head against the wall, closing his eyes.

He’d expected it, of course, but hearing Sanji’s grandpa say it out loud….

His heart ached...yet bursted with relief and happiness for Sanji at the same time.

A moment more, and he finally came out of hiding, turning the corner and entering the kitchen with the towel he’d grabbed for Sanji, the blond’s favorite blue one peppered with cartoony angel fish.

He crossed the room and dumped the towel over Sanji’s head, lips tilting up gently when Sanji flailed his way out from under the heavy fabric to look up at him.

Zoro gazed at him softly for a moment more, then turned from the room and headed back upstairs, leaving Sanji with his family.

He felt Sanji’s eyes on him the whole time.

Maybe Zoro should have been polite and stayed downstairs with the guests, but he had no interest. He knew they were good people. Sanji had always spoken of his sister and grandfather fondly. And that was all that mattered. Sanji would be fine. That was all that had ever mattered to him.

After returning the spent 3DS almost reverently to the bin beneath Sanji’s bed, he’d dried off and
changed clothes, lying down and distracting himself with the glow-in-the-dark tigers and sharks stuck on the ceiling, their lights swirling together in one mosaic.

But his mind was still out on the pier, in the pouring rain, with Sanji’s lips and his embrace working to warm him in ways he’d never thought possible.

It was with uncertainty, however, that he lay there, choosing to worry himself over Sanji’s sincerity rather than the fact that he’d soon lose him. If Sanji shared his feelings, then maybe, just maybe, that could keep him content when they parted. If the thought was true that, even for a short time, Sanji had felt what he had, maybe Zoro could be okay without him…

Of course, some time later, after hearing their guests leave, Sanji and Robin coming upstairs a bit later…. After hearing the shower run and stop, soft footsteps padding down the carpeted hall until the door to their bedroom opened quietly…. After seeing Sanji step in and shut the door behind him, clad only in a towel below the waist, tossing his wet clothes in the corner and avoiding Zoro’s eye….he knew.

He knew that he was wrong. Nothing could likely make him feel better about leaving Sanji.

Zoro stayed where he was on his bed, watching the blond with a tightness in his chest as Sanji opened the closet door and stepped behind it to pull on his boxers as he always did.

He didn’t know what he was expecting from Sanji, if he was too upset to talk or what. Zoro wasn’t necessarily scared to initiate now, but he didn’t want to push Sanji, not when whatever had come over him was likely new and daunting.

So he waited to see what Sanji would do, waited until he’d pulled on his goofy striped pajama bottoms and a soft hoodie, waited as he stood with his back to Zoro for a long moment under the guise of shaking fingers through his partially dried hair.

Then he tossed his towel over the post of his bed frame and crossed the room to Zoro with conviction.

He crawled onto the mattress beside him, nervous, but determined.

Zoro let out a shuddery breath, but quickly made room, scooting closer to the wall and turning onto his side to face the cook, who curled up as well.

They didn’t touch each other just yet, the close proximity enough to have hearts racing and very recent memories swirling.

Zoro was the first to speak after a long minute of watching Sanji’s eyelashes batting skin gently when he blinked, noticing the bits of sunburn that stained his nose and cheeks.

“When do you leave?” he murmured, and Sanji squirmed slightly.

“Thursday,” he answered. “Reiju wants to take me out to dinner tomorrow night. Might sleep over at her apartment so we can talk some more…”

Zoro nodded, unsure how else to respond, and then, tentatively, he crawled closer, slowly, giving Sanji ample time to stop him.

Sanji didn’t though.

In fact, when Zoro was close enough, he tilted his chin up so he could meet Zoro’s lips.
It felt just as good, just as reassuring and right as it had on the pier, and Sanji took confidence in that, drawing out the kiss for longer than planned until they were both forced to pull away with huffed exhales and bashful grins.

Zoro’s knee bumped his as he whispered, “Did you mean this...?”

Sanji smiled at the hopeful tone to his voice, and he shifted a little closer until their foreheads touched.

“I think so...” he whispered back, the tiny, but relieved smile that pulled up Zoro’s lips filling Sanji with warmth, perhaps more than seeing his sister and grandpa had brought.

Carefully, Zoro reached out, wrapping his arm around Sanji’s waist, slowly but surely tightening his grip until he held him securely.

Sanji curled his hands at Zoro’s chest, and that was where they stayed.

The following few days leading up to that fateful Thursday were hectic, filled with packing, not only of their own belongings, but of the house as well, which was owned by the city and might not see use depending on how soon they could procure a replacement for Robin.

It was sad, to see furniture covered with white tarps, to move everything out of Franky’s treehouse and into storage in the basement. It was sad to pack up the bikes, and to start boxing up all of Sanji’s kitchen supplies, unable to take them with him.

Of course, he wouldn’t be needing them. Sanji’s grandfather was a chef, and a hugely successful one at that, with his own popular restaurant. Sanji could finally practice his cooking more, really study and have the proper opportunities afforded to him, even if he’d be living several hours away, all the way in East Blue.

And Zoro would be…well, he didn’t yet know where he was going, only that he was.

They were all leaving on Thursday, after all. Sanji’s grandfather was coming to get Sanji. Robin was moving out to West Blue for a few weeks to receive training prior to her trip abroad.

And that left Zoro to wonder just where the social worker due to pick him up would be taking him. Even Robin didn’t have the answers, the information refused her considering she no longer worked for the city, and that was terrifying.

But Zoro remained quiet, accepting, trying to be strong when it was, in fact, Sanji that was panicking the most on his behalf, asking Robin to pull strings, practically begging her to find out Zoro’s fate. They needed to stay in touch, he insisted, and Zoro knew Robin knew this, was trying her best.

And that best consisted of a list of possibilities that she had been able to research. A list of care facilities, group homes, and the names of some potential foster situations, but narrowing it down had been impossible, and Sanji had been livid, not at Robin, but at the situation.

Zoro had watched him grow increasingly agitated until it culminated their last evening in the house, the blond stomping back and forth around their bedroom, amongst the boxes and suitcases currently strewn about, ranting and fretting about all the uncertainty.

There had been nothing to do but stay calm, show Sanji he wasn’t scared, even though he was, more so than he wanted to admit.
Of course, being able to grab him by the wrist and pull him down for a reassuring kiss certainly helped matters.

“Quit freaking out,” he muttered, tugging Sanji closer to stand between his legs from where Zoro sat on his bed, balling up remaining clothes that he was supposed to be neatly folding and tossing them into an open suitcase beside him.

Sanji growled in Zoro’s face, pushing him back stubbornly and storming over to his own bed where he’d been busy packing up his electronics.

“Don’t tell me to quit freaking out, Zoro!” Sanji screeched over his shoulder, trying to assemble his thoughts after that kiss, fingers furiously wrapping up charger cords and securing them with rubber bands. “They could send you to a horrible place! They could chain you up to a post and not feed you for days on end, or---”

“Well, jeez, why you gotta take it there?” Zoro muttered, irritably tossing a T-shirt into his suitcase and squishing it down with a hand to make it fit in the already stuffed space.

“Well, jeez, why you gotta take it there?” Zoro muttered, irritably tossing a T-shirt into his suitcase and squishing it down with a hand to make it fit in the already stuffed space.

“Because, Zoro! If anything bad happens to you, how the hell am I gonna be able to live with myse-...”

He trailed off suddenly, but Zoro merely rolled his eyes.

“Oh, please, Curly. I knew what I was doing. I did this so you’d be okay, and you will be so I’ll be fine, knowing that. So quit---oi, are you even listening?”

Zoro stopped, noticing how the fight seemed to have drained from the blond, how his shoulders had slumped and his head had dropped, back still facing him.

For a second, Zoro was irritated at being ignored...until he realized that wasn’t so.

Sanji was holding something in his hand, staring down at it, fixated, and it was strange enough that Zoro got to his feet and crossed the room to Sanji where he peered over his shoulder.

Sanji’s breaths came lightly because, in his hands, he held a game case that he’d never seen before. And yet, it was entirely familiar because there, on the cover, was an illustration of himself, or rather, the Prince, dressed regally all in white, a bejeweled crown of delicate silver nestled in his longer hair.

A breathtaking sunset was behind him, as was his castle atop the high sea cliff, but he stood, ocean waves lapping at his feet, looking back over his shoulder with a hand outstretched for his knight, dressed in his finest polished armor, pristine swords at his hip, and his hand reaching right back for the prince.

The bright oranges and pinks of the sky were nearly as brilliant as their smiles.

Sanji ran his thumb over the case that had always been blank since he’d bought it, a lump suddenly forming in his throat before he felt a nudge to his side and turned to see Zoro with his hand waiting expectantly.

“Let’s go for a walk,” he said with a gentle smirk, jerking his head towards the door.

Sanji held his gaze and found himself nodding, carefully setting the game case down with his other belongings and taking Zoro’s hand.
They’d promised Robin they’d be back soon, that they weren’t running away from all this, the two of them stuttering and blushing madly when she reminded them that elopement wasn’t legal until eighteen.

Zoro had dragged Sanji the hell out of there before the idiot could stammer his way into an embarrassed ditch.

And so they’d made their way from the house on foot, fingers loosely linked as they walked the street down to the beach, for what was probably the last time, the sunset bleeding warmly into the lingering blue, pink clouds like Chopper’s favorite cotton candy strewn about in long puffy strips.

Zoro’s old sneakers scuffed and Sanji’s sandals slapped against the warm pavement, the breeze salty, buzzing with dragonflies that hovered by and the ever present call of seagulls near the water.

They were quiet, though Zoro could hear Sanji taking in deep breaths through his nose now and again, most likely relishing in the calm of their peaceful neighborhood, yet to fill completely with the tourists who made these houses their homes during the summer months.

They smelled barbecue somewhere in the distance, heard voices and the sound of a dog barking, but other than that, there was nothing but Sanji’s dramatic breaths, something that Zoro teasingly imitated loudly, looking Sanji’s way just to make sure he’d annoyed him.

Sanji scowled at him, but didn’t release his hand.

Neither were entirely sure where they were headed, until they stopped on a private stretch of sand, the pier in sight down the beach, now populated by fishermen and vacationing families enjoying ice cream, the outdoor restaurants nearby humming with conversation and summery classic rock.

But the two of them stayed away from the crowds, both kicking off shoes and carrying them along as soon as they hit sand. They moved to the surf’s edge where walking was easier, and Zoro plopped down, Sanji’s fingers sliding from his as the blond continued towards the water to stand ankle deep in the waves, the wind softly taking his hair, and his gaze fixed firmly on the horizon where the sun dipped ever lower.

Zoro was content to watch him for a minute before he leaned back and stretched out, elbows sinking into the warm sand and his chest lifting with a meditative breath as he dropped his head back and closed his eyes.

He didn’t open them until he heard the soft squeak of Sanji’s feet compressing in the loose sand some minutes later and he looked over to see Sanji lowering himself to sit beside him, for once seemingly not caring if he got his shorts sandy.

Zoro pushed up to sit as well, quirking a brow when Sanji lifted a hand to brush fingers through the mosshead’s hair, muttering about sand as he shook some of it loose.

“Does your grandpa live by the sea?” Zoro asked once Sanji seemed satisfied that his hair was in order. Sanji loved the ocean, Zoro knew. He’d be happier if he was near it.

“Yeah. He lives on the coast,” Sanji replied with a sigh, dropping his hand back to his lap and turning his gaze towards the sparkling ocean once more. This wasn’t the last time he’d be seeing it, but there would certainly be something different at his grandpa’s, less like home….

“That’s good,” Zoro murmured beside him, in the slightly awkward tone Sanji recognized as the one he used when he didn’t have any other response.
Sanji looked at him, noted his clenched jaw, the way his eyes flicked to Sanji’s hand now and again, almost uncertain.

The cook had noticed him fall into these strange nervous bouts for the past few days, even though things had gone about as well as they could have between the two of them, on the romantic front. They hadn’t talked about anything in depth, just accepted that there was something strangely magnetizing between them, accepted that it did sometimes make them pursue physical affection, however innocent.

They had moments of confidence, but also moments of hesitance, both unsure how far to go, what to even do when they were well aware they’d be forced to part in a few days’ time.

Sanji didn’t want that. He didn’t want things to end awkwardly, and he figured Zoro didn’t either, but he could tell the other teen was treading carefully, most likely for Sanji’s sake.

But Zoro’s comfort and happiness, Sanji found, concerned him more than his own confusion and uncertainty, more than his own inner battle to accept that the one creating these very real emotions within him was a guy, even though he’d been trying hard to convince himself gender didn’t matter.

It didn’t. The rational part of him knew that. And the more he was with Zoro, the more comfortable he felt with embracing this. He cared about Zoro for who he was inside, first and foremost.

“It wasn’t…’cause I didn’t feel anything, you know, that I waited…” Sanji murmured, holding Zoro’s gaze when the mosshead turned to look at him with mild surprise. He let Zoro’s bewildered state fuel his conviction. “It was ‘cause I did….I do….and….it was like you said the other night. It was scary.”

Zoro’s surprise simmered into a smirk, and he inched his hand a little closer to Sanji’s leg, jabbing holes in the sand with a finger absently.

“So what changed…?” he asked, trying to keep the amusement from his voice lest he stop Sanji from answering.

Thankfully, Sanji seemed to be in a reflective mood, now watching the lick of the waves against the sand, the frothy bubbles left in their wake.

“That’s the weird part,” he replied, and Zoro was pleased to see a smirk pull at Sanji’s lips too. “Nothing changed. It was just like….through all of this….I finally….woke up.”

Zoro couldn’t help a loud snort, one that tapered into snickers quickly.

“That sounds so cheesy,” he teased, feeling his chest clench pleasantly when Sanji actually laughed too.

“Yeah, it does,” the blond admitted, running a hand back through his hair and rolling his eyes good-naturedly. He lowered his hand to the sand then, along with his gaze, tracing circles there, closer and closer to Zoro’s hand.

“The thought of---of me being with a guy is---is still fucking weird for me to picture,” Sanji mused as he traced, eyes on Zoro’s fingers until the mosshead walked them over to brush Sanji’s. “But….it’s not guys. It’s…you. And if I think about you instead, then…somehow it’s not so bad…”

Zoro slid his hand fully over Sanji’s then and squeezed, ducking his head to grin cheekily in his face.

“So m’special,” he deduced haughtily.
“I never said that,” Sanji countered quickly.

“Bet you were thinkin’ it though.”

“Shut up. You’re just glad you’re not the only one thinking this sappy shit now.”

“So you were thinkin’ it,” Zoro concluded with a smug quirk of an eyebrow and a sidelong glance. Sanji grumbled automatically, but it was mostly to conceal how glad he was that he wasn’t alone.

Zoro was on this stupidly sentimental ride with him. If it had been anyone else, it would have been too embarrassing to handle. But considering Zoro was one of the most prideful people he knew, and he’d fallen just as hard? Well, that certainly made things a little easier to stomach.

Particularly when Zoro seemed to lose track of himself, like he was now, eyes on Sanji for far longer than normal, long enough for Sanji to wrinkle his nose and stick his tongue out, just to remind the dumb mosshead he was staring before he drooled all over.

Zoro frowned self-consciously and glared at the amused blond.

“Do you think they’ll let us keep our phones?” Sanji asked, stretching out a leg in front of him as Zoro gently explored his hand with his fingertips. The cook let out a bitter laugh as he realized, “I never even added your number.”

Zoro huffed a breath and shrugged, realizing how damn pathetic that fact was now that everything had changed between them.

Sanji continued to mutter to himself about getting Zoro a Skype account, that as long as Zoro at least had access to a computer, they’d be able to talk.

But Zoro knew it wouldn’t be the same as being with him, as being in his presence and feeling every amazing thing Sanji made him feel firsthand.

Not to mention, if they were physically apart….he worried everything Sanji was beginning to feel for him would be forgotten….or replaced.

“Maybe we can—I dunno---” Zoro muttered once Sanji trailed off with his jabbering. “Find each other after we graduate or something…” He paused, however, brow furrowing and gaze dropping to the sand. “You’ll probably….go to college though, huh…and by then, you might not even…”

But Sanji’s heart leaped into his throat the second Zoro’s tone fell.

Yes, what he was feeling for Zoro was entirely new, and the time they’d shared with that realization had been terribly short. But the feelings were powerful, and considering how the last week had gone, all of them taking over his mind, Sanji couldn’t imagine they would fade any time soon.

“Hey,” he said forcefully, waiting until Zoro looked up hesitantly. Then, he was adamant.

“I’ll find you,” Sanji assured, and he managed a little smirk, even if his heart had begun to hurt immensely with all this talk of their separation. “You’ll just get lost looking for me.”

“Shut up…” Zoro mumbled in response, though he gave a small smile. There was no telling what the future held, but for now, he’d have to trust in Sanji’s word.

Sanji sighed beside him, then pulled his hand out from beneath Zoro’s and carefully scooted closer to him on the sand until their sides were flush and he could shyly lean his weight against him. Initiating
physical contact himself was still a bit daunting, especially when his emotions weren’t quite so heightened and insecurities began to flare up.

“Can we just...pretend this isn’t happening...just for now...?” he murmured, tilting his lips and chin gently into Zoro’s shoulder.

“Yeah...yeah...” Zoro breathed in reply.

The two fell quiet then, Sanji relaxing into Zoro as the minutes passed, particularly when Zoro’s hand rose to his hair, lips turning there a second later. Sanji let arms lift to circle Zoro’s torso, squeezing with more confidence the longer they sat.

They watched the water and the sunset, fear burgeoning in their hearts because that sunset symbolized the end of everything they’d come to know. The brighter the colors became as the sun sank ever lower, the more their moods dimmed.

It was stupid because it was something they’d always wanted, to leave this place, to go somewhere they belonged, a stable, forever home.

But that was proving to be far more difficult to do when they’d be leaving everything they loved.

It wasn’t quite apparent when it had started, but eventually, wetness began to soak Zoro’s T-shirt, Sanji’s body giving a shudder. He was so fucking done crying over this shit, but he couldn’t help it. He would be fine.

Zoro was the one he was worried about.

Zoro. Whose hand circled Sanji’s head more protectively, his body turning to pull Sanji properly against his chest, pressing his own forehead into his hair to hide the tears springing to his own eyes.

“Zoro...” Sanji’s voice trembled, and he sucked in a few quick breaths to try and compose himself, rather futilely.

“Yeah, Sanji...” Zoro replied, nearly whispering.

Sanji’s fingers gripped the back of his T-shirt, pressed palms there a second later to feel Zoro’s broad form properly, strong and solid.

“Tomorrow,” he choked out, clenching his teeth. “Don’t say goodbye to me...”

Zoro pulled back, enough that he could tilt Sanji’s chin up and look him in the eye.

“Never...” he said fiercely, then leaned in to kiss him, closed but firm.

Sanji responded instantly, lips pressing back with fervor, hands lifting to grab Zoro’s face.

How could they say goodbye when they’d only just said hello...?

“Front seat’s all yours, Zoro.”

Ms. Makino, the same social worker who’d come to escort Luffy from Sunny, was standing by her forest green SUV parked in Sunny’s driveway, back seat loaded with Zoro’s two suitcases of belongings, meager compared to his friends, but they held everything he needed. Mostly...
The sun was already hot that next morning, and the glare glinting off the passenger door was strong when she opened it for him.

He stared at the car, the vessel that would take him away from this place into unknown territory. Then he shifted his gaze solemnly to the red sedan parked beside it, the trunk of which was open as Sanji and his grandpa packed in the last of Sanji’s things as well, Zeff’s gruff voice grumbling orders, directing the teen on where to fit the boxes.

As they’d feared, he and Sanji had been forced to turn in their phones, considering they had been provided by the State. Sanji could get a new one easily with his grandpa. Zoro had no idea if he could.

Thus, his eyes were dry, but his throat was tight. Despite how much he willed it to slow, his heart still pounded hard and fast in his chest in mere anticipation over what this day would bring.

“If you’d like to say goodbye, I’ll give you a minute,” Ms. Makino murmured gently with a kind upturn of lips, and then Robin’s arms were around his shoulders, pulling him into a tight embrace the likes of which she usually spared him from. But that day was different, and he sighed, letting the moment happen, his arms circling her waist.

“I’ll be fine,” he found himself murmuring to her when she pulled back to press a kiss to his cheek, a mere turn of her head sufficient for that as he was nearly her height now.

“You will,” she replied, caressing the back of his head fondly, blue eyes watery. She lowered her voice then so she wouldn’t be overheard. “But please e-mail me if you can. So I can be certain.”

He nodded seriously. She pulled his head down for one last kiss to his forehead. Then he turned to trudge resolutely down the walkway.

Sanji and his grandpa had closed the trunk to their car, both circling around to the side of the driveway where Robin stood. Zoro walked past, making his way to Makino’s car.

The woman had moved to the driver’s side, but she noticed Zoro’s bypass of the young blond, enough that she jolted a little and stammered.

“I can wait, Zoro, if---”

He did stop, just before sliding into the passenger seat. He turned his head and locked eyes with Sanji, who was watching him, expressionless.

Zoro stared at him, memorizing how he looked in that moment, how sun-bleached his hair was becoming, those blue eyes that had come to understand him better than anyone else, his lips… all things he would never forget, no matter how much time passed until they next met.

He should have been looking at the house, taking it in too, the place that had been the first true home he’d ever had.

But without the people, his family, it held only echoes.

“It’s okay,” he said, in answer to Makino, but the statement was directed at Sanji, who understood the reassurance immediately, nodding in return.

In that moment, there were no words, only the strength in Zoro’s steely eyes, the rise and fall of his chest in calm, measured breaths, and the trust Sanji had decided to place in him, in the universe, that what he said would be true.
Sanji stood there on the front lawn, watched Zoro climb into Ms. Makino’s car, watched them pull out of Sunny’s driveway and cruise off down the street and out of his life.

And shortly after, he watched Robin lock the house with finality, get into her own car as he and his grandpa got into theirs.

Both cars went separate ways, Zeff giving a quick honk of his horn in farewell to Robin.

Sanji leaned his head against the window and closed his eyes, actively trying to keep Zoro’s face there in his mind.

Ms. Makino’s car was quiet, save for the radio playing softly, and the silence was heavy and awkward. She was one of the nicest social workers Zoro had ever encountered, but it was still tense, and he knew she could feel it as well, judging by the way she repeatedly turned her head to look at him as they drove off down the block, putting Sunny behind them.

Eventually, she sighed softly.

“I’m sorry for the secrecy, Zoro,” she said, and tried to smile, hands twisting a little anxiously on the steering wheel. “But there was actually some debate about where to place you. We had to scramble a bit because of the late notice. You were almost moved out of state. I’m sure it was stressful, not knowing.”

“S’fine,” Zoro mumbled, not really in the mood to chat, even if the weird silence continued to stretch on as a result. He didn’t know where they were going, and at this point, he didn’t care.

His gaze stayed firmly out the window as they drove through the familiar neighborhood, the colorful beach houses passing by. There were more cars, now that summer had arrived.

Makino braked after a few more blocks, putting on her turn signal and waiting for a line of traffic to pass in the opposite lane.

“Well, Mr. Mihawk has only just been approved for foster care,” she said, cranking the steering wheel and bearing left onto an adjacent street once the path was clear. “His paperwork was finalized only a few days ago, in fact.”

This street was quieter, further back from the ocean, most of the homeowners not yet returned, evident by the taller grass and overgrown hedges in front of some. Makino slowed the car, checking the street signs, then leaning forward to try and get a look at the house numbers and name placards as they rolled along.

Zoro looked over at her curiously, wondering if she was fucking lost already, but he said nothing.

“Okay, I think this is right,” she mumbled, more to herself before flashing a smile at him. “But anyway, because he lives so close and the timing was right, we felt it would be an easier adjustment on you, living with him.”

Zoro’s eyes narrowed in confusion.

“Be on the lookout on your right,” she continued. “For a house called---”

Then his eyes sprang wide.

“Wait!” he interrupted loudly. “So I’m not leaving Logue Town?”
She chuckled, still scanning houses.

“We weren’t sure at first,” she replied distractedly. “But like I said, these accommodations just became available---”

“Turn around.”

Next, it was her eyes that widened, eyebrows shooting up with them in surprise.

“What?” she stammered.

“Turn around!” he insisted almost frantically. “I forgot something!” And when she didn’t react right away, he nearly shouted, “Do it! Please--!”

He was practically pleading now. He *had* to tell Sanji. It didn’t matter how this home turned out to be. Just the fact that he could know where to find him!

Makino had slowed the car nearly to a stop, still looking at him with some degree of alarm. She stared at him for a long moment, but eventually tried to smile, nodding.

“Alright,” she conceded, then turned the wheel to make a three-point turn on the empty street.

But Sanji had gone. Both Robin’s and Zeff’s cars had already left Sunny, and Zoro had to actively remind himself not to punch the dashboard, not to curse while in the car of a social worker.

He’d merely clenched teeth, run hands over his face, and inwardly hated himself for losing his composure when he’d tried so hard all morning to keep it.

Thus, the car had fallen back into tense silence after Makino’s concerned apologies, after they started driving again and found themselves on that same familiar road not ten minutes from Sunny. Makino scanned the houses, but Zoro didn’t look, just stared dejectedly at his lap until she finally pulled the car into a driveway and parked.

Only then did Zoro look up, unable to keep the surprise from his face because he *recognized* the place specifically.

It was that strange black house, high up on stilts, which Zoro had noted had the cool name scrawled on the hanging placard, ‘Coffin Boat,’ where, a few weeks ago, Luffy had found the caterpillar.

There was an old vintage sedan already parked in the driveway beneath the house, long and also black, looking more like a hearse than a passenger car, next to a more modern-looking Audi, and before they’d even gotten out, Zoro noticed the front door open, up the dark wooden stairs, a tall figure stepping out onto the front deck above.

It was a man, Zoro saw as he peered up through the car window, a man with jet black hair combed back, neatly trimmed facial hair and a white high-collared shirt that gave him the appearance of an old-time painting as he stared down from the deck with a strangely piercing gaze.

Zoro found himself staring right back as Makino shut off the car and he slowly opened his door, watching the man the entire time. The man didn’t move, didn’t greet them, and in fact, his presence seemed to make Makino nervous, the woman hastily fumbling to take up her clipboard and help Zoro get his suitcases from the back.

Even as the two of them climbed the stairs to the front deck, Zoro able to carry both his suitcases
easily, her voice stammered, introducing the man to Zoro as Mr. Mihawk, shaking his hand flimsily and making her way through the formalities with far more haste than she had at Sunny.

And yet, Zoro didn’t back down, just watched this man who was to be his caretaker, nodding when necessary and reaching out first to shake his hand, holding it there in the space between them, almost in challenge.

Mihawk’s eyes didn’t leave his as he took Zoro’s hand, and it should have been intimidating. But in fact it was oddly calming, distracting at least from the pain of parting with Sanji that morning.

It focused Zoro somehow, enough that he wasn’t quite as worried when Makino eventually left, when it was just him and Mihawk, the man leading him through the front door into the house.

It opened upon a large room that took up most of the one-story house, the kitchen in the back separated from the sitting area only by a dark granite counter topped with burning candles that Zoro smelled right away. The walls were painted a thick crimson, and the curtains were heavy and black. The leather furniture, also black, circled around a coffee table, but there was not a TV in sight, and the artwork on the walls was peculiar, oil paintings of night skies in gilded antique frames.

The interior was hardly beachy, more gothic if anything, nothing like Zoro would have expected from a house so close to the ocean.

Zoro noted the closed doors along the wall to the right, but before he could wonder which was his bedroom, Mihawk shut the front door behind him and began walking across the room with an absent gesture.

“Leave your things,” he said, voice smooth and serious, with a hint of a pompous foreign accent. “You can unpack them later. For the moment, please follow me.”

Zoro’s brows furrowed, but he had no choice but to obey, tentatively leaving his suitcases by the door and stepping across the rich mahogany of the hardwood floors after the man.

Mihawk led him into the last room, his own personal bedroom by the looks of it, a massively majestic four-poster bed situated in the middle, the walls there a charcoal gray, the furniture following suit in various tones of black.

Zoro stopped in the doorway, a little unsure, but Mihawk entered with purpose, moving to a large wooden chest at the foot of his bed, which he unlatched and opened, the top flopping back onto the mattress behind.

Mihawk reached in, moving aside a strange tri-cornered hat with a giant fluffy white-green feather attached before he stopped.

His hands hovered for a moment, until, to Zoro’s surprise, he pulled out a first generation Game Boy, its gray boxy shape ridiculously chunky in his ringed hands, compared to the thinness of Sanji’s 3DS.

Something about the sight set Zoro’s heart right back to pounding in his chest, particularly when the man pulled a game cartridge from the back, holding it up for Zoro to see that it had no label or title whatsoever. To him, it looked blank.

“Does this seem at all familiar to you?” he asked, quirking a brow expectantly.

Zoro swallowed hard, with nothing else to do but nod.
“You...had the last game. You’ve gotta be shitting me…” Zoro muttered, leaning forward heavily onto his knees and rubbing fingers at his temples.

They’d moved to the living room, the Game Boy on the coffee table between them and the air ripe with unanswered questions.

Mihawk, seated in his arm chair, crossed one leg casually over the other, swirling his glass of red wine and taking a delicate sip. His expression tensed, the man seeming ruffled by Zoro’s coarse language, but he said nothing against it.

“Indeed I did,” he replied. “I found it at the very same shop you did. Of course, the adjoining café was a donut shop then….and the man who sold me the game had a rather peculiar smile…”

Zoro squeezed his eyes shut, tuning out most of Mihawk’s superfluous details because, more importantly, it had all been real, not only Sanji’s game, but perhaps the legend itself, if there really had been several incarnations of the game. And Zoro had to believe that was true considering, in the half hour since they’d met, Mihawk did not seem the type to readily spout fairy tales.

“Just---” Zoro stammered, eventually sitting back on the couch and turning to look at the man. “How the fuck did you know we had it too?”

Mihawk leveled Zoro with an unimpressed stare, eyes calculating, and yes, judging, silently.

“I was on my way for a coffee several weeks ago at the Mermaid Café when I overheard you and your little friend’s juvenile argument in the parking lot,” the man explained, lips turning up in the first hint of a smile he’d given when Zoro’s eyes narrowed. “My interest was piqued. I was aware of the Thousand Sunny home up the road. So I did a bit of research into your situation.”

“You stalked a bunch of kids?” Zoro scoffed. “You a creep or somethin’?”

Mihawk’s smirk instantly slipped back into a frown.

“You, child, are not in a position to be criticizing me when I have voluntarily offered to take you under my wing.”

Zoro rolled his eyes and looked away, falling into a sulk.

“Doesn’t make you a good person automatically….”

Mihawk ignored his tone and fell quiet, drinking his wine in silence with no further explanation.

And the silence went on long enough, left Zoro with far too many lingering curiosities, that the teen huffed an impatient breath, eventually looking insistently to Mihawk again.

“So….what happened to you with that?” he pressed, jerking his chin towards the Game Boy.

Mihawk’s eyes fell to the device, though he took his time replying, staring at it for several long moments, as if lost in memory, before finally answering.

“Believe it or not, I was in a similar situation when I was young,” he said, not taking his eyes from the Game Boy. “I was in a foster home with two other boys. One you may even know. Shanks? The vagabond fisherman who was your previous caretaker? To be honest, I’m not sure how you survived under his care...”

“No shit!” Zoro squawked in surprise. “You knew Shanks?”
“Far too well,” Mihawk muttered, though his tone was laced with an underlying fondness that Zoro recognized entirely. It was the same tone Sanji used with him when he was annoyed.

He sighed, trying to keep his mind in the present, keep from slipping into pining thoughts so damn soon. Instead, he focused on Mihawk’s tale. If Mihawk was the owner of that game, then it must have meant...

“So you….helped them?” Zoro asked slowly.

Mihawk nodded.

“To make a long story short, yes.”

“And what about you?” was Zoro’s next question.

The man shrugged gracefully.

“As you can imagine, nothing happened after I finished the game,” he stated simply, without a trace of regret nor pain at the memory. “I will spare you the details, but I remained in a group home until I came of age. Much as I imagine you would have had I not stepped in.”

For a moment, Zoro’s chest clenched. This man knew everything, had been there at the exact right place and time to hear his and Sanji’s argument about which of them would be the last remaining.

And that was strange. Zoro felt exposed, somehow, for something that, until then had been a very personal decision. Helping Sanji had been a no-brainer, but to think about what could have happened to either of them….what could still happen to him….it was scarier than he wanted to admit.

“Yeah, but….the game wasn’t mine…” Zoro mumbled eventually, for lack of anything better to say. “It was---my---friend’s….I found it, but….he bought it. And I---killed him in the game. I didn’t want him to be stuck.”

Mihawk seemed to regard this for a moment, the only hint of surprise on his features the slight quirk of an angular brow.

“How noble of you,” he mused. “Perhaps that is why good fortune has found you as well.”

Again, Zoro had to scoff, looking around at his surroundings, which looked more like a medieval dungeon than anything.

“You sayin’ it’s good fortune to live with you?” he muttered, the words slipping out before he could stop himself. He was supposed to be making a good impression here, but dammit, he couldn’t help but be cynical.

“The backyard is always an option…” Mihawk replied easily from behind his wine glass.

Zoro rolled his eyes, huffing out a breath and picking at his jeans, unsure of what to do when everything he’d even bothered to expect was quickly being turned on its head.

He’d thought he’d end up at some random family’s house an hour away, a family with kids of their own and too-perfect lives. A family that wouldn’t be able to handle his brooding introversion, wouldn’t get his sense of humor or his personality and eventually send him away to the next. He wouldn’t see his friends again. Not for a long time at least. And that was how it should have gone.

But now…
As fucking weird as it was to realize, even in this dimly lit vampiric house, paired with this weird old-fashioned guy who didn’t seem to have any modern technology in sight….there was a glimmer of hope returning to Zoro, slowly but surely.

And it was enough that, a minute later, he tentatively wondered aloud, “Did you ever see them again? Shanks. And the other guy.”

Mihawk had seemed perfectly okay with the silence. In fact, Zoro’s words seemed to draw him out from deep introspection, to his mild irritation.

Still, he answered.

“Not for many years, but yes. I can’t imagine it will be as difficult for you, given the age we now live in. I will help you procure a new phone—”

Zoro couldn’t help it. His face lit up in a way it hadn’t all day, that niggling hope beginning to spread, flutter in his chest stupidly. He knew Sanji’s grandpa would get him a new phone. This assured they could talk! They could fucking find each other!

“Eventually,” Mihawk emphasized. “I would like you to earn it. And assist with payments.”

“Eventually?” Zoro screeched in a childish whine, hopes effectively crushed. Dammit, he needed to talk to Sanji now! “What the hell does that mean? I don’t have a job. And I need that fucking phone!”

“Then you’ll be extremely motivated,” Mihawk replied, seemingly unperturbed by Zoro’s outburst, downing the rest of his wine as nonchalantly as could be.

“For what?” Zoro balked.

Mihawk’s eyes flicked to Zoro’s T-shirt, the pair of crossed swords on the front beneath a logo for the National Kendo Federation. Franky had picked it up for him at a biker convention a few months back.

The man smirked.

“I have something in mind I think you may enjoy.”

---

**Three months later…**

The start of the school year was always a pain in the ass for Zoro. Maybe not much changed year to year, but it had always been a pain to feel out new teachers, figure out if he could get away with sleeping through their classes or not. New classrooms that liked to change location randomly. New classmates that he didn’t always care to learn the names of.

There had always been a constant though.

His friends. His *best* friends, most of whom had attended his high school and motivated him to go every day, even if studying gave him great difficulty, at least studying anything he held no interest in….which was most things…

Still, he’d thought, after three months adjusting to a new home, a new life, that maybe going back to school would be a welcome respite. At the very least, the building was familiar.
But of course that had been a misguided thought.

The first morning of school had started strangely, with a trip to the social services office, because the school had needed proof of Mihawk’s guardianship, a reminder that, yes, things were different, and yes, he now lived with a creepy weirdo who somehow gave him something to strive for, to get better at, for all his quirks.

And he was a little glad no one was around to see Mihawk’s grand hearse roar up to the curb when his guardian dropped him off afterwards, at the end of first period.

Zoro had slammed the door shut with the usual scowl, receiving the typical loud harumph from Mihawk in turn. It was a wonder they were both content with each other.

Then he’d shuffled his way to the office to deliver the necessary paperwork, somehow found his locker, and picked up his schedule from the guidance counselor.

It was more painful than Zoro expected, to walk through the school, his only consolation the thought of finally seeing Usopp again.

Finding his friend’s new apartment had been impossible without a phone, after all, and he’d sure as hell fucking tried one day, ultimately riding halfway around the city on his skateboard before giving up for the time being.

Summer vacation had thus been long, and ultimately lonely.

So he’d thrown himself headfirst into his new guardian’s mastercraft, which just so happened to be fucking kendo of all things. Kendo, Zoro’s talent for which had been quickly snuffed out as a child when his foster sister died and he’d been wrenched from Koshiro’s home after only a month of lessons.

It came back quickly though, perhaps more quickly than Mihawk expected, something that Zoro smugly realized seemed to disgruntle the weird guy entirely when he rose through the ranks faster than any of the man’s other pupils.

But Zoro had a purpose for his advancement, other than his rekindled passion, and that was Sanji. It was always Sanji. All summer it had been Sanji.

After all, Mihawk was withholding his smartphone, as motivation for his training, until he reached sho-dan level, something he was on track to do in the coming weeks.

A shitty tactic, but dammit, it had worked. That phone was his connection to his friends, but most of all, to Sanji, and if he advanced far enough, then the phone was his, and he could finally find him again, even if it was just online.

His desperation had grown though, with every fucking day. Every day, Zoro had thought about the blond, about how pissed he’d be that Zoro had ignored him, how his face would look, lips pulled back in that vicious snarl that was menacing, but also incredibly attractive.

He fucking missed him, enough that it kept him from sleep, the first few nights at Mihawk’s house spent lying awake and staring across his new bedroom where a dresser now stood instead of Sanji’s bed.

He’d tried to let it go, to push the blond out of his mind, but, ever the stubborn bastard, there Sanji stayed. He wouldn’t leave, and Zoro had begun to think maybe not even internet could solve his problems.
Sanji had been a constant presence in his life, his real life, the one he hadn’t started living until he’d come to Sunny. The one where he could be himself, be happy and secure. Sanji had been there, and even if their relationship had grown from rocky beginnings, having Sanji by his side had always been a reassurance.

And now there was nothing where he should have been.

Maybe he’d accepted that their separation was what needed to happen in order to improve Sanji’s life.

But Zoro realized, as he’d walked through the school halls again, through the throngs of carefully planned back-to-school outfits and the tittering conversations and gossip already circulating, that he didn’t like feeling this alone.

He missed having Luffy pop out of nowhere to hang off his shoulders through the hall. He (somehow) missed exchanging eye rolls with Nami when they passed each other.

And, even if it had only been a recent addition to his life, he missed having Sanji waiting for him at his locker, walking with him to class so he “wouldn’t get lost,” and he knew he’d miss him at lunch especially, when he’d done nothing but complain about the quality of the cafeteria food like a pretentious dick.

He missed his best friend, his……his…..

He didn’t know what he and Sanji were.

But he missed the one person who had made him feel every stupidly good thing he’d never thought himself capable of feeling.

Thus, Zoro walked into his auditorium study hall, five minutes late, with a bleak feeling in his chest, remembering all the times he and Sanji had shared in this room while Mr. Kuzan slept, playing on their phones when they weren’t supposed to, Sanji trying to help him with his homework before it divulged into whispered insults hurled back and forth.

But he couldn’t think about that, because even though everything else was similar, even if Mr. Kuzan was already positioned in his chair by the stage, a notebook and pencil spread out on the folding table before him, it was different.

His classmates were already seated, scattered among the rows of the cavernous room, murmured voices and snickers heard as they tried and failed to remain quiet.

He couldn’t see Usopp’s head anywhere, a disappointment, but ultimately unsurprising. He knew his younger friend preferred to pack his schedule with classes every period.

So he moved towards a quiet back corner, away from most of the other students, hoping Mr. Kuzan wouldn’t descend upon him for being late.

He slunk over, as inconspicuous as possible, about to slide into the last row when a figure came into view, already sitting in the last seat by the wall, slumped down with his knees propped against the seat in front of him, scribbling patterns into his notebook and looking utterly miserable.

Zoro stopped short in the aisle, his mouth going dry and his heart skipping several beats.

He stared at that figure, who seemed to mirror his own feelings of the day so well, his brow drawn tight, anxious energy driving his doodling hand to swirl faster, his design nothing but a whirlwind of
Zoro’s voice didn’t sound like his own when he finally spoke. It sounded small and breathless, and yet hopeful for something he hadn’t dared consider….the thought that maybe the one he’d been yearning for all summer hadn’t left his life as he’d assumed.

“Sanji?”

The blond froze, his mechanical pencil, which had been gliding smoothly along the margin of his notebook, instantly slipping from his grasp and rolling into his stomach.

Sanji didn’t look at him for a long moment, merely stared straight ahead at the stage on the opposite end of the room, and Zoro could see his breathing become just as light and shaky.

But then he turned his head slowly.

Their eyes met, and the room disappeared. The soft murmurings of their classmates faded to nothing, and they were suddenly the only ones there, Zoro’s heart in his throat as it hadn’t been since they’d parted months ago.

Neither of them reacted for several seconds, unable to do much besides remember how to breathe.

Until they both moved at once, Sanji sitting up, his pencil sliding onto the floor with a soft clatter, forgotten, and Zoro practically teleporting the several strides into the aisle where he fell clumsily into the seat next to Sanji, his eyes on the blond the whole time.

Hands found each other’s arms, holding on for dear life.

“What are you doing here?!” Sanji hissed with disbelief, struggling not to shout the damn question given where they were.

“What are you doing here?!” Zoro shot back. “I thought you moved!"

“I-I did, but---” Sanji stammered, his mind spinning and struggling to make sense of the very solid ball of moss in his grasp. Zoro was fine. He was here. “But I came back to live with my sister because I wanted---I thought---I dunno, I thought maybe Usopp and I could look for you or---” He shook his head, too eager to hear Zoro’s voice again. “But---you’re still here? You weren’t in homeroom! How--? Do you---?”

It was no use. Proper sentences wouldn’t form, not when Zoro’s hands were scrambling up his arms, over his shoulders to find his jaw, his hair.

“I live right down the fucking street from Sunny!” Zoro exclaimed frantically, as if Sanji would disappear should he not get the words out quick enough. “I---I had to go to social services this morning. Mihawk had to sign some stuff and---”

“Mihawk?” Sanji interrupted, fingers twisting unconsciously in Zoro’s T-shirt sleeves, pulling him closer as his eyes roved over Zoro’s face. “Wait, are you---you’ve been in Logue Town? You’re staying?”

Zoro nodded, almost comically fast, and considering he’d wanted to share this news with Sanji for months now, it was almost a relief to do so.

Sanji let out a whimpering breath of disbelief. And then he couldn’t take it.
A quick glance around the auditorium, at the backs of their classmates’ heads several rows in front of them, at Mr. Kuzan dozing by the stage…. 

Then he threw his notebook on the floor, slid off his chair onto the floor himself, and pulled Zoro down behind the seats to slam lips to his forcefully.

The kiss was awkward, hardly suave and smooth like Sanji had always wanted to be, but neither of them seemed to care. Even though their noses bumped, even though teeth clacked, and Zoro’s hand shot out to save himself from knocking the blond completely back onto the rough carpet, it didn’t matter. Their excitement and relief was far too great for self-consciousness.

Fuck all that. Fuck where they were, how this had happened. They were together, even if lips pressed frantically, hands groped clumsily, and inexperience showed.

The moment ended with foreheads pressed together, both of them huddled on the floor, heavy breaths panting over each other’s lips.

“Why didn’t you message me…?” Sanji huffed, hands in Zoro’s hair, playing with his earrings, voice barely above a whisper. “I messaged you so many fucking times. I thought---I didn’t know where they took you, and I was so fucking….”

He trailed off, but Zoro answered him immediately, reassured him.

“I’m sorry. I’m okay,” he breathed, a giddy smile tugging at his lips and his nose tilting into Sanji’s, content to revel in the fact that Sanji had initiated all this, that nothing had changed.

“Did you forget how to install apps?” the blond asked desperately, searching Zoro’s eyes. “Did they move you to a fucking jail cell? What happened…?”

Zoro shook his head, letting his fingers curl in the bottom of Sanji’s sweater, knuckles brushing shyly at the bare skin of his sides now and again.

“Mihawk won’t let me get a phone until I master the first seven kata. M’real close though.”

“Kata….? Mosshead, you’re making zero sense.”

“Kendo,” he clarified, snickering when Sanji continued to look baffled. “Swords?”

The blond let out a breath at that, couldn’t help but smile a bit before he also shook his head, then slid arms around Zoro’s shoulders to hug him close without a care.

Zoro reciprocated, his arms shifting to secure Sanji’s torso firmly, tilting his head to press his face into blond strands as the cook buried his against Zoro’s shoulder.

They stayed like that for a while, yet undiscovered between the seats, and when Zoro felt the wetness of tears against his shirt, he said nothing because there was a huge-ass lump in his own throat and there was nothing to say.

They simply held each other until Sanji started to pull away first, clinging to Zoro with one hand, but wiping at his eyes with the other.

Zoro lifted a hand automatically, bringing it to the young cook’s face to help him, and Sanji let him, though he rolled his eyes and tried not to laugh through his embarrassment.

He brought his sweater sleeve to Zoro’s cheek for good measure, even though the tears in Zoro’s
eyes had yet to spill.

Sanji sat back then, relaxed a bit and slumped against the wood of the seat in front of him, and Zoro did the same, leaning a shoulder there and watching the blond. He couldn’t quite comprehend fully how Sanji was back, but he chose to forget that for now, focus on the pleasant flutter of his heart, the feel of Sanji’s fingers gently playing with his as they both took the moment to calm down.

“So you’re happy…?” Sanji asked eventually. “You’re really okay?”

Zoro nodded.

“Yeah. Other than….missin’ you,” he admitted with a slightly sheepish shrug. “Swear I’ve wanted to call you every fucking day…”

He was a little wary still, of Sanji’s reaction to his absence. By all means, the blond should be pissed at him for going dark, even after they’d promised to stay in contact. He couldn’t help it that Mihawk was an old-fashioned prick.

But Sanji fell into a relieved smile, because there were more important things on his mind.

Zoro’s feelings were still there. He hadn’t forgotten about him. And more importantly, Zoro was okay, despite everything the game had led them to worry about. He was safe, not trapped in some terrible situation, even if he was apparently living in medieval times without freaking technology. That would sure as hell have to change.

Sanji started to lean closer before he really planned it, but Zoro met him halfway, the second kiss far more gentle and controlled, innocent, but emotional, fears and frustrations falling away easily, as if they’d never been apart.

And yet, it was something Zoro couldn’t quite lose himself in yet, not when it was still very apparent in his mind, just how fucking incredible it was that this was even happening in the first place.

Never in a million fucking years could he have foreseen this, foreseen Sanji’s fingers gripping his short hair, the romantic slowness with which he rocked lips into Zoro’s, enough that Zoro actually snickered and stopped, pulled back just when Sanji came at him again with puckered lips.

“Been practicing on your pillow, Curly?” he asked, chuckling, earning himself a hard pinch on his arm.

“Shut the fuck up!” Sanji screeched, though it came out as an offended whisper. A thump of his fist to Zoro’s chest did nothing to erase the dumb mosshead’s smirk.

“I just…” the blond said, then trailed off teasingly, flicking eyes back to Zoro.

Missed you too, was Sanji’s thought, but he wouldn’t be letting Zoro know that until he was ready to be properly sentimental.

Predictably, Zoro’s brows immediately furrowed in confusion, the dense idiot unable to fill in the blanks.

“What?” he asked, but Sanji shrugged casually.

“Nothing.”

“Seriously, what?” Just when he’d thought the blond would quit being such a damn enigma, to use a
recently learned vocabulary word.

“You’re stupid,” Sanji said.

Zoro’s jaw dropped.

“So are you!”

Sanji grinned, ecstatic that nothing had changed between them.

Instead of explaining himself, he opted for a subject change before Zoro alerted the entire auditorium to their secret floor meeting.

“How the fuck is this possible?” he asked, poking Zoro in the chest before smoothing down the fabric of his shirt absently, an excuse to touch him. “The game was---you were the last one left. I thought you’d be stuck somewhere awful.”

At that, Zoro’s sour expression quickly morphed into a grin, and he shifted closer into Sanji’s space, wondering how close he could get before the blond either kissed him again or shoved him back.

“So did I, but…” he started, wondering how the fuck to explain everything Mihawk had told him.

Sanji’s gaze had fallen to his lips. Not long now.

“‘Member what the game store lady said?” Zoro continued. “We weren’t the first ones to play it. And I doubt we’ll be the last.”

“So...?” Sanji breathed.

By that point, Zoro was but an inch from Sanji’s lips, so he leaned in with a kiss anyway, not waiting for Sanji.

“I’ll tell you later,” Zoro said, and kissed him again.

Sanji rolled his eyes impatiently, but found himself distracted by Zoro’s warmth, boldly but sincerely shifting lips to his jaw, just for a few moments before he pulled back to look at him.

Zoro met his gaze as he always had, Sanji realized, with a hopeless devotion laced with vulnerability, even now, and it spurred Sanji’s hands up to his face, thumbs stroking over his skin. It was still rather amazing to Sanji that he himself was okay with this, this overturning of his assumed sexuality.

Girls had been one thing. But Zoro was something else entirely.

“I never thanked you, Zoro….” he found himself murmuring, loving the way Zoro’s eyebrow quirked quizzically up close. “For giving me my family back...”

Immediately, Zoro’s nose scrunched up and his lip curled.

“Don’t. It’s awkward,” he grumbled, prompting Sanji to grin broadly.

“I---” the blond started again, just to tease.

“Don’t!”

Sanji leaned in closer, jutted out his bottom lip in a pout.
“You’re my hero---”

“You’re my hero---” Zoro squawked, shoving Sanji back and bringing hands to his own head. “M’not a hero!”

“You are, and now you’ll go down in legend as---!”

“Shut up! I’ll fucking kill you, Curly!”

Sanji feigned a dramatic gasp. “Again? You’d do that for me? Zoro, I---”

And then his back hit the floor as Zoro leaped atop him in a tackle that had limbs flailing, knocking into chairs loudly, and bodies quickly scrambling to one-up the other.

By the time Mr. Kuzan appeared in the aisle, drawn over by the ruckus, Sanji had Zoro in a headlock, and it could have been for any old reason. It was well-known fact that the two liked to roughhouse.

They ended up separated, with three seats forcibly between them and the threat of being moved farther should they act up again.

Still, it didn’t much matter, because both of them fell into snickers as Mr. Kuzan made his way back to his chair to sleep off the remaining half hour of the period.

Sanji curled up in his seat, turning his body towards Zoro, and the mosshead did the same, the two of them quiet, but enjoying the lingering laughter between them.

Zoro glared at him silently through a smirk, and Sanji stifled a laugh, flopping against the seat. He watched Zoro, unable to wipe the grin from his face. He bit his lip to try, but it was no use. With Zoro sitting there, back in his life where he belonged, he couldn’t contain his excitement.

Sanji flipped him off, which prompted Zoro to lean towards him and follow suit, mouthing a few choice curses at him that he didn’t really mean.

They rode out the rest of their study hall that way, enough that it became a sort of silent game that lasted even after the bell rang.

They didn’t speak, even on the way to their lockers, a challenge to see who would break the silence first and effectively lose.

But the small brushes of fingers, their smiles, and the pleasant warmth in their chests was enough.

They didn’t need words, and it ultimately didn’t matter who broke first.

They had each other, and that meant the game had already been won.
Eleven years later…

“What if he hates us…?”

“Given what he’s been through, you really think he’ll hate us?”

“But I didn’t—know about him! What if he resents that?”

“Sanji. He’s six.”

“We were fucked up when we were little…”

“Would you quit freaking out?”

Sanji’s hands gripped harder on the steering wheel, especially when Zoro’s fingers reached over from the passenger seat to try and pry them off.

The cook stared stubbornly at the road, even as Zoro’s hand pulled, eventually screeching when the dumb mosshead threatened to break his fingers with his tugging.

“Ow! Zoro!—I’m—fucking driving, would you—stop it!”

“Shut up! Let me hold your hand! M’tryin’ to make you feel better!”

“Who said I needed my hand held?!”

And yet, his grip slowly loosened, allowing Zoro to take his hand properly, feeling the worn calluses of Zoro’s fingers that came from years of wielding a blade, the grooves that seemed to fit perfectly over his own. He felt the golden band on Zoro’s ring finger, his own thumb shifting to rub subconsciously over the matching ring on his left hand.

Zoro brought the back of Sanji’s hand to his lips for a kiss before letting their hands rest more comfortably on the console between them.

“He’s not your brother…” Zoro murmured over the beachy rock playing on the radio. “And you’re not your brother.”

Sanji sighed and spared Zoro a glance to see his husband had pushed up his sunglasses, the warm wind from the open window whipping the short wisps of hair at his forehead. He had a soft smirk on his face that grew as soon as they made eye contact.

Well, as much as that look made his heart flutter, just the same as when they were teenagers, he wasn’t about to admit Zoro was right, so he rolled his eyes and turned his head away to face the road again, amidst the sound of Zoro’s snickering.

It was helping, Zoro’s confidence, but dammit, he was nervous, even as the sights on the road grew more and more familiar, the touristy strip malls, the palm trees, the smell of salt in the air under the hot sun.
They were going back to Sunny for the first time in so damn long. Maybe they’d both stayed in Logue Town until Sanji had graduated from GLU, but that was over five years ago. And they weren’t just going back for any old visit.

There was a reason why the back seat of the car held a cooler full of snacks, snacks Sanji had prepared himself for little hands, fresh fruit, crackers, juice. There was a reason there was a vast array of stuffed animals lined up, a wolf, two dinosaurs, a lion, and a snake.

And yes, there was a damn good reason for Sanji’s nerves. Because not a week ago, he’d gotten a call. A call that his apparent nephew, whom he hadn’t known existed until that very day, had been removed from his brother, Yonji’s home after reports of alleged neglect. He was being housed at the Thousand Sunny Home for Youths, and was in need of a guardian.

The fact that Zoro had been the first to say they should do it was unsurprising.

Sanji agreed, but there were worries…so many of them. They hadn’t even been close to considering kids, let alone one that was already six years old, with a troubled past.

But there they were, making the trip from their hotel downtown to the outskirts of the city, with only the paperwork they’d gotten from social services that morning, and the small photo of a surly-looking little boy named Goji off which to base any assumptions.

Sanji had taken off work at his grandpa’s restaurant, the Baratie. Zoro had trusted the seniors to run kendo practice at the university while he was away, and they’d been off on their ridiculously sudden journey.

And yet, they knew, if not what to expect, that they had to pay it forward. They had to give another kid a chance, just as they’d been afforded all those years ago.

So they drove, through the streets they remembered so well, the streets where they’d truly learned what love and family meant, where they’d found each other.

There were far more residences in their old neighborhood, many of the empty lots and patches of waving sea grass now developed, huge multi-story beach houses now standing in their place, but it was still home.

Zoro especially knew, still coming back to visit Mihawk a few times a year, mostly to have his ass kicked at his adoptive father’s dojo. Perhaps they could have stayed at his house during their visit, but it was much easier to not, the man not particularly hospitable in the slightest.

But they hadn’t returned to Sunny, and so, when the big red house came into view atop the grassy hill, looking every bit as bright and welcoming as it used to, Sanji actually found himself braking, just so they could get a look at the house before pulling into the driveway.

They could practically hear Franky’s massive lawnmower, the coasting of bike and skateboard wheels, the sound of music playing from the outdoor speakers on warm summer nights...

Neither had fully noticed the car had stopped entirely until, a minute later, Zoro turned back to look at Sanji, and gave a teasing yank of the wheel to encourage him to break out of his memories and finally pull in.

Sanji shoved his shoulder in response, but obliged, rolling up the driveway and parking behind a large blue minivan stopped outside the open garage.

They knew nothing, not how many kids lived there now, nor who their caretaker was. Robin was in
Thailand and thus couldn’t tell them, and though Franky still worked at the shipyard, he’d only supplied the fact that it was “some big guy, friend of Den’s,” leaving Sanji with more questions than answers.

Still, they’d bravely exited the car, Sanji grabbing his small briefcase full of paperwork should they need it, as well as the grocery bag full of ingredients they’d picked up on the way, because he was damn well going to offer to make lunch.

Zoro reached back to grab one of the stuffed animals, hesitating over which for a moment before deciding upon one of the goofy-looking dinosaurs. Even if the kid didn’t like it, it was more of a peace offering than anything. It was Sanji’s food that would ultimately win him over, after all.

The blond rounded the car, pausing when Zoro reached out to grab his waist, giving a supportive squeeze.

“Fuck, this is so weird,” Sanji murmured, gazing up at the house and remembering the last time the two of them had stood in this spot all those years ago, a painful parting of ways, or so they’d thought.

Zoro pressed a kiss to his cheek.

“Yup,” he said, giving the blond a tug. “Let’s go.”

“How are you so calm about this?” Sanji muttered, but followed him to the porch.

“Cause I know it’s gonna be fine,” Zoro replied as they strode down the familiar brick walkway. “Things always are.”

“Yeah, well, one of these days, our luck’s gonna run out, y’know,” Sanji shot back as they reached the stairs.

Zoro just chuckled.

“Okay, Usopp.”

“Hey, at least he’s realistic,” Sanji said as Zoro pressed the doorbell, both pleased to hear the same faint melodic chime they remembered Mr. Brook having set. They’d have to call him after everything, provided he wasn’t putting on a concert for his assisted living community.

“Kay, but he still managed to get that big-wig graphic design job straight out of college. You sayin’ that’s not luck? An’ that doesn’t even cover Chopper and Nami.”

“Fine, point taken,” mumbled the blond, thinking about Chopper’s easy entrance into the best medical school in the country, and Nami’s practically instantaneous acceptance into her Masters cartography program.

It was ridiculous, how much fortune had favored each of them in the end. Even Luffy had landed a job, albeit on Shanks’ ship, but there was no time to linger on that as a lumbering shadow came into view through the windows by the door.

Sanji took a deep breath, shared a glance with Zoro before the doorknob jiggled and it swung open to reveal a massive man, broad and thick, filling up the entire doorway easily, his orange bathrobe blinding against his dark skin.

The two of them weren’t short, but they still found themselves looking up and up at the man’s face, stern and serious for a split second before he broke into a broad toothy grin.
“The Roronoas, yes?” the man asked in a deep, but good-humored voice.

Sanji elbowed Zoro in the side hard when his dear husband snickered and shot him a smug look.

“Sanji Red,” the cook corrected, because he was damn well sticking to his mother’s maiden name, thanks.

But he jutted his hand out all the same, the stranger taking it in his huge one for a strong shake.

“Zoro Roronoa,” introduced the mosshead sulkily, following suit.

“Mr. J., as the kids say, but please call me Jinbe,” said the man, who then beckoned for the two to enter the house, his long black curls bouncing over his shoulder when he turned his head.

Sanji and Zoro squeezed past the man’s broad stomach into the entrance hall, and just like that, they could have been teenagers again, faced with the house they knew so well, the sound of young voices in the other room, dishes clinking in the kitchen....

The furniture was rearranged, and there were new potted plants scattered about. The entrance hallway now had a long blue carpet stretching back to the kitchen.

But it was home, and Sanji knew Zoro felt it too when the swordsman’s fingers brushed at the small of his back and he pressed a little closer.

“Come on back to the kitchen,” Jinbe was saying. “Goji was workin’ hard to bake you some---well, I’ll let him tell you...”

Zoro quirked his brow over at Sanji, who wore an expression of mild surprise that the boy was working in the kitchen, the last thing he’d expect from a son of Yonji, but neither said anything in response.

The big man started to lead the way, passing the doorway to the living room where a new, and much bigger flatscreen TV hung on the wall.

“Kids, say hello,” Jinbe called to two boys seated on the couch, the pair fiddling with some VR headsets and murmuring quietly to each other in a clear secret conference.

“Hello,” they both called in unison, though neither left the room or so much as looked over.

Sanji snorted as they walked past, though he was admittedly far too preoccupied with the constant memories assaulting him from every side. And he was thus too preoccupied to notice one of the boys slip his headset off and peer over the back of the couch at the men as they disappeared down the hall.

Just before they entered the kitchen, Jinbe paused, noticing the lingering glances Zoro and Sanji shot at the walls, at the new photos full of unfamiliar faces.

“Must be strange for you two, huh,” the man said, features softening as he stopped and waited in the doorway. “Heard you lived here way back when.”

Sanji met his gaze, where he sighed and smirked.

“Strange, but nice. I missed it here,” he answered, smirk growing when Zoro’s hand stroked the back of his neck affectionately, threaded in his hair for a brief moment.

Jinbe’s lips turned up, then he pushed open the swinging door to the kitchen and stepped into the room.
“Goji, your uncle’s here,” he said, and it was odd for the cook to hear, considering it was a title he hadn’t known he possessed.

And it became all the more real when there was movement behind the counter, the top of a little green head just visible before a young boy popped out into the open, a sagging paper plate piled high with chocolate chip cookies held in both his hands.

His gaze was downcast. In fact, he didn’t even look up, but though his hair was short, buzzed close to his head in fuzzy spikes, Sanji recognized those dark brown eyes and the tense way his brows were furrowed.

He was the spitting image of his father, and perhaps this should have filled Sanji with animosity. But instead, it just left him feeling a little sad, particularly when the boy stared harder at the floor and shoved the cookie plate closer.

“I’m Goji, nice to meet you, I made you cookies, Mr. J. helped,” he huffed out, practically all in one breath, leaving Sanji in particular a little shocked at his manners, not to mention the rather appetizing display he’d apparently thought to prepare.

The blond tilted his head curiously, shared a smirk with Zoro, then moved to set the grocery bag and briefcase onto the kitchen table, Zoro setting the stuffed dinosaur down too.

“Really?” the blond mused gently. “Well, they look great from over here.”

And he crossed the room to the counter, the boy still not making eye contact as he stepped closer.

Unfortunately, doing so tipped the already drooping plate a little too far, and though Jinbe lunged forward to catch several cookies with his large hand, he couldn’t save all of them, half the plate falling to the floor with a gooey splat.

There was a long moment of silence, the boy’s eyes wide with horror as he fixated on the mess, Sanji
and Zoro frozen too, unsure of his reaction.

It was Jinbe who quickly moved first, clapping a hand onto the boy’s shoulder and ruffling his hair gently to try and avert his attention.

“Hey there, no problem,” he murmured, his gruff voice soft and encouraging. “We got more in the oven, remember? Here, I’ll get anoth---”

An ear-splitting screech cut through the room.

Goji’s face scrunched up with both sorrow and rage, and the paper plate he still held soon met the floor too when the boy whipped it out of his hand.

“No!” he wailed at the top of his lungs. “I made them! It’s not fair!”

“Hey, kiddo, c’mon, it’s okay. We’ve talked about this.” Jinbe tried desperately to reassure him, though it was obvious his own nerves were heightened, particularly when he glanced back over his shoulder at Zoro and Sanji with a worried grimace.

The child screeched louder, stomping his foot before burying his head in his hands, fingers scrabbling over his head, struggling to grab and rip but unable to. It suddenly became a lot clearer why his hair was cropped so short…

This was not a normal reaction, Sanji realized, even if he was young. This wasn’t a normal tantrum, because there was something else there, beneath the gnashed teeth and the tears, something heartbreakingly real that he recognized, remembered.

Zoro felt it too. Sanji could see it in the shaky way his husband’s chest moved, his brows drawn in tight, troubled.

It was fear. That much was obvious when Jinbe lifted his hand to try and touch Goji’s face, only to make the boy scamper backwards with a yelp, eyes suddenly wide and focused on that hand, his own little fists raising in a pathetic defensive act.

Sanji watched those trembling fists lash out at Jinbe, who blocked them, but danced back out of the way, clearly reeling in a more stern reaction given the presence of their two guests.

Goji merely gave a feral growl of frustration and turned to punch the underside of the counter instead.

It was Sanji’s heart that effectively shattered in two with that punch, his body going numb as this boy morphed into his own younger self, sad, scared, and alone. Wounded, in more ways than one. He felt his breath shudder, his eyes burn with emotions he’d long suppressed, emotions he thought he’d moved past over the years.

He could not fall back into this.

But he wouldn’t, because Zoro’s hand materialized, squeezing Sanji’s tightly before the swordsman stepped past him, past Jinbe to stand a little closer, but not close enough to corner the kid.

“Hey,” he said, in the voice Sanji knew commanded the attention of everyone, young or old, serious, strong, sharp.

It worked, the boy still crying and sniffling loudly, but tearful eyes flicking instantly to Zoro, who knelt down a few paces away and held up a steady hand.
“C’mere,” he murmured in that same tone, but the difference was the upward tilt of his lips, the challenging glint in his eye. He gently bumped his waiting hand with his own fist. “Go for it.”

The boy quieted, still staring, his breaths still coming heavily, the tears and snot still running, but Sanji saw it, the curiosity and almost disbelief that flashed in his eyes.

“P--Punch…?” Goji croaked, and Zoro nodded.

“Yeah. Me,” he said decisively. “Not other stuff or anyone else. I can take it.”

Goji stood there for a few heartbeats, seemed to be debating in his head whether to trust Zoro or not.

“What happens if….I punch other stuff…?” he finally asked, voice still defensive, but small.

Zoro leveled the child with sincerity, pushing everything that silently said he understood towards him.

“S’not gonna be what used to happen,” he said simply, and the boy instantly bit his lip when it wobbled threateningly.

But then, in a split second, he let out a little snarled cry and rushed over to slam his fist into Zoro’s palm with all his might, Zoro’s arm only moving back minutely to provide some give.

He stayed where he was though, merely grinned and jerked his chin in indication the boy could do it again, and Sanji sighed, feeling the tension lift from his chest and his love for the man burst stupidly in place of the uncertainty that had reared its ugly head a moment ago.

Jinbe was watching the scene with interest now, still with a handful of cookies, but a slow acceptance washing over his concerned features.

Sanji smiled, and took the distraction to bend down and pick up one of the fallen cookies off the floor, examining the melty chocolate dotting its golden brown exterior.

He stayed crouched there and took a bite, chewing contemplatively.

Goji’s punches were coming slower, enough that Zoro took the moment to turn his head to Sanji pointedly.

“Oh, hey, how’s the cookie?” he mumbled with hardly any subtlety, but it didn’t matter. It distracted the kid, his jaw dropping open and his eyes fixated when he saw what his uncle was doing.

Sanji grinned before going in for another chocolatey bite, raising a hand to cover his mouth as he chewed.

“It’s delicious,” he replied, eyes on Goji the whole time. It was the first time they’d properly made eye contact.

He watched the boy’s face twist from surprise through confusion, before settling on quiet hope.

“But….it was on the floor…” Goji mumbled incredulously, lips a tiny frown.

Sanji merely shrugged and popped the last of it into his mouth.

“Yeah, well. Five second rule,” he said after swallowing. “Y’know, when we get home, I can show you how to make chocolate souffle. Ever had that before?”
“Really?” Goji replied and shook his head, scrubbing away lingering tear tracks.

“Yeah. I’m a real chef,” Sanji said.

The boy turned back to look at Zoro.

“Are you a chef?”


“Really?!” Goji screeched in amazement, an even bigger reaction, any ill feelings forgotten in favor of complete and utter awe. “I can fight with a knife, y’know!”

Sanji rolled his eyes a little when Zoro looked his way, clearly far too impressed with the child’s statement.

“If you wanna learn, we’ll work our way up,” Zoro assured, reaching up to pat Goji on the head approvingly, something that brought not fear but excitement to the boy’s eyes this time, the haunted terror gone entirely.

Jinbe chuckled and bent to scoop up the rest of the fallen cookies as Goji began interrogating Zoro, asking if he could cut various things in half with his swords, including people.

Content that Zoro had him occupied, Sanji too stood, placing a hand gently onto the boy’s shoulder, satisfied he was stabilized when he didn’t react.

It seemed the mosshead’s faith in the situation had been right, as always.

“Oh, I was going to ask,” Sanji said as Jinbe grabbed a few paper towels from a roll near the sink. “Can I make you guys lunch? I brought stuff for barbecue if you’re hungry.”

Jinbe grinned, coming back around the counter to clean up the rest of the chocolate off the floor.

“Barbecue, eh?” He raised his voice then, to call into the other room. “’Y’hear that, boys? You were sayin’ how hungry you were not twenty minutes ago!”

No response though, and Jinbe shook his head with a smirk as he made his way back towards the sink.

“Honestly. That video game of theirs. Hard to tell if they’re even playin’ anything. The screen’s always blank. Anyway, I’ll help out. I know a thing or two about grilling. Not too keen on fish though. Now, shrimp I can do!”

But Sanji had stopped paying attention as the man prattled on with a hearty laugh, blue eyes instantly locking onto Zoro’s, his husband’s head having shot up at the same time.

The question fell from their lips simultaneously.

“A game?”

~END~

Chapter End Notes
Thank you so much for reading! I know this was a bit of a crazy concept for a fanfic, and I questioned whether I'd be able to pull it off more than once. But I'm happy to (finally) have it finished, and I hope you enjoyed it! Since it's the end, I'd love to know your thoughts if you have the time! Otherwise, I'm off to work on something else! Thank you again! <3

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!